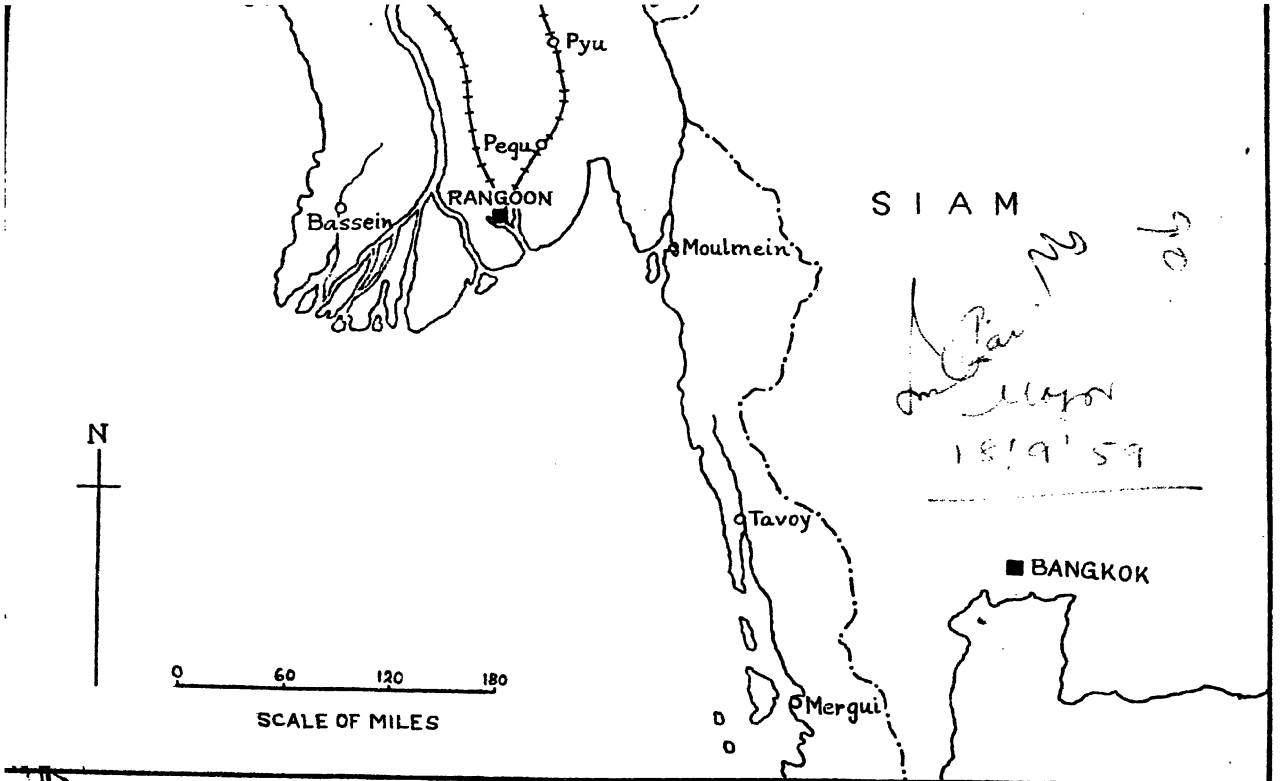
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THE HISTORY OF THE ASSAM REGIMENT

LT.-COL. W. F. BROWN D.S.O., O.B.E. *[Frontispiece*

THE HISTORY
OF
THE ASSAM REGIMENT

Volume 1
1941-1947

COMPILED BY
Captain Peter Steyn, M.C.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THE COMPILATION of a regimental history can never be the sole work of one person, and so it was with this history. That the story of the Regiment should have been told at all is entirely due to the splendid co-operation given to me by everyone I approached. Our records were pitifully few and many past members of the Regiment, some of them scattered over the five continents, were therefore called on to delve back into their memories and then commit their impressions of long past battles to paper at my request. This they did and more, for they came back with stories long forgotten by me and almost unprintable in content. So with much assistance and encouragement the story told here began to take shape a little over two years ago.

From amongst the many to whom I am indebted I wish to thank particularly — Major Amar Sen, who did much of the initial spadework and research on the history before handing over to me; Brigadier Ross Howman C.I.E., O.B.E. for all his invaluable information concerning the early days of the unit; Major M. G. Littlehales of the 2nd Battalion and, Major Elwyn Lloyd Jones, M.C. for his patient reading and correcting of my drafts.

It has been my honour to give to the Regiment, on behalf of its founders, the story of its birth, the battles it fought and finally of its transition to peacetime incorporation into the Regular Indian Army. I pay here my own tribute to the fine officers and men who made all this possible.

P.S.

FOREWORD

TWO IMPRESSIONS that this well-written History leaves upon my mind are, first, what a remarkable measure of good fortune attended the Assam Regiment pretty well from birth to maturity, and secondly, how well worthy it proved itself of all the good luck that came its way.

Under a first commandant of unusual knowledge and experience as well as powers of organization and command, it got through all the difficulties — and they were many indeed — attending the birth and adolescence of a new unit with surprising rapidity, and was able to parade for its inauguration within five months of the date of its conception. How well I remember the scene at Government House, Shillong that showery day in June 1941, at a time when we were still at peace with Japan and still in utter ignorance of what war with Japan was to mean for Burma and India; and how well has the Regiment lived up to the reputation which I then ventured to prophesy it would achieve.

Next it was fortunate in its officers, for Lieutenant-Colonel Howman was succeeded by Lieutenant-Colonel Brown who, first as Second in-Command and then as Commanding Officer, trained and led it with conspicuous success for nearly four years, including those desperate days at Kohima in 1944, to be killed in a comparatively minor engagement in the victorious advance into Burma in January 1945.

Lastly, it was fortunate in having its history written so close after the war in terms which bring out so vividly the incidents of its career.

To realize the spirit which imbued officers and men from the start, one has only to read the story of their early days at Digboi, whither (it was, be it noted, a war station, not a training area) they went within six months of being raised. Everything, weapons, equipment, vehicles, accommodation, that should ordinarily be regarded as sheer necessities, was

lacking. But what was not lacking was the spirit which overcame those obstacles, the spirit which knit together and formed a single whole out of the diverse elements, Assamese, Naga, Lushai, Kuki of which it was composed. Thus it was, when the test of battle came, that it was able for ten vital days to hold up the advance of the Japanese at Jessami and Kharasom. From there, their immediate job done, they retired to Kohima to turn and face the enemy once more for another sixteen days until the Japanese attack was finally stayed. For their prowess in the Kohima battle, I cannot do better than quote what Sir William Slim says in *Defeat into Victory* (and praise from Sir William is praise indeed) — 'The main weight of the enemy advance fell on this battalion, in the first battle of its career. Fighting in its own country, it put up a magnificent resistance, held doggedly to one position after another against overwhelming odds, and, in spite of heavy casualties, its companies although separated never lost cohesion. The delay the Assam Regiment imposed on the 31st Japanese Division at this stage was invaluable'. In other words, it was the stubborn valour of the Assam Regiment at Jessami and Kharasom that enabled a situation to be retrieved which had approached nigh to disaster.

This in fact was the Regiment's finest hour. It is sad that the 1st Battalion only was present, and that the 2nd Battalion had no part in it. The story of the 2nd Battalion, raised as it was about twelve months after the First, is one of disappointment. They trained and trained, and, so good were they at jungle warfare, that they were used to train other units, but they were condemned to eat their hearts out in far-off Southern India while their brethren were covering themselves with glory on the frontiers of their native land.

It must have been poor consolation to them to be told, as they doubtless often were by bland inspecting officers, that they too were playing a vital part in the war.

It is gratifying to know that the authorities have wisely decided to retain the Assam Regiment as a permanent unit of the Indian Army.

I am not much versed in the general run of regimental histories but I am quite sure that this one must be much above average both in the story it has to tell and the way that story is presented. It ought to be placed in the hands of every school boy in Assam.

SIR ROBERT NEIL REID, K.C.S.I., K.C.I.E.
Governor of Assam (1937-1942)

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INTRODUCTION

A REGIMENTAL HISTORY apart from its value as an intimate and authentic historical record, is written for depicting the glorious deeds of a Regiment, of those who have served in it and of those of the Regiment who have fought and laid down their lives for their country. It serves to encourage those who serve in the Regiment to maintain the established traditions. It is a morale raiser. It is there to serve as a constant reminder to those present and to the future entrants as an ideal lest they forget or momentarily falter during any crises in their lives. They point out the correct and honourable path which all new-comers must follow if its traditions are to be upheld in the same glorious manner as by their forerunners. It lights up a star on the horizon which must guide them in all their actions.

This history, though it is that of a very young regiment, has certainly laid down such a path and has lit the star in the heaven of India's Military tradition, for us all, at present in the Regiment and those who come after us to follow. I congratulate the compiler, Captain Peter Steyn, M.C., on his inspiring narration of the history of this Regiment since its raising.

There are many regiments in our Army today who have fine records but I doubt whether there have been any units in the Indian Army, which within such a short period after their raising from a semi-military organization such as the Assam Rifles, have covered themselves with such glory. The Regiment has had the honour of taking a part in a vital battle, within three years of its raising, all by themselves, against overwhelming odds. Of facing an enemy superior in strength in men and material and flushed with their previous successes all through the First Burma Campaign. A battle which, though it ended in great losses in the Unit and an ultimate withdrawal, contributed so much towards

the final holding off of the invading Japanese in the hills of Assam sufficiently long to allow the organization of the defences in the rear leading to the ultimate destruction of the enemy. Had the battalion wilted even a little at Jessami and Kharasom, the fate of Kohima might easily have been different and the Japanese pincers would have closed, resulting in a very critical situation. No wonder that eminent soldier, Field Marshal Slim, who was then the Field Commander in the East, so deservingly praised the stand of the Unit and today the Regiment has been given the proud honour of having Jessami as their first battle honour on the new standard to be presented by the President of India.

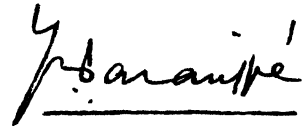
The credit of all these achievements in the War and later goes to the officers and men of the First Battalion who laid the foundation of the Regiment. Particular mention must be made of Brigadier R. H. Howman, C.I.E., O.B.E., who raised the Unit and laid the corner-stone of its foundation and of Lieutenant-Colonel W. F. Brown, D.S.O., O.B.E., who commanded it during the operations at Jessami and Kharasom battles and later. In the old East India Company's days the first battalion may well have been called 'Howman ki Paltan' and I think that even today it would not be out of place to call it the same, even though the old custom has changed.

There are, of course, further heights to be attained. In peace time such attainments consist of superior training and efficiency, exemplary discipline and turnout and achievements on the playing fields. In War, these consist of giving an account of all that has been learnt in peace time, by gallantry and steadfastness. In this way only many a page written in golden letters will be added to this short but glowing history of the young regiment.

All of us serving in the Regiment will come and go. Individually we shall be forgotten; but the Regiment and how we mould it, what we contribute towards its good name and what we hand over to our successors will remain forever and ever.

If this history teaches us to bear all this in mind so that

all our efforts are directed to raising the name of the Regiment, higher and higher, and to maintain and increase the honour of its name so gloriously founded, its purpose will have been served.



MAJOR-GENERAL Y. S. PARANJPE
Colonel of the Regiment

CHAPTER I

RAISING THE REGIMENT

15 June 1941

AT THE outbreak of the last Great War, Assam had no regular infantry regiment which was truly her own. Two Indian Army battalions had indeed in years past borne the name of the Assam Light Infantry but these were never specifically recruited from Assam and their direct lineal descendants still exist in some Gorkha units.

Men from the Province had, however, served for many years in Assam's frontier corps of police — Assam Rifles, which in addition to Gorkhas had enlisted Kacharis, Kukis, Lushais, Nagas and men from many of Assam's other tribes. Moreover hundreds of men had come forward in World War I and had served overseas with distinction, notably in the Gorkha Rifles and also in units of the Indian Labour Corps. For these, later, the Naga and Lushai Hills had each produced 2,000 men; in addition there were contingents of Garos, Khasis and Mikirs.

Thus Assam had her military tradition, and a very creditable one. The first step towards giving it expression in World War II was when, at a cabinet meeting held in Shillong in June 1940 the late Sir Muhammed Saadulla, then Chief Minister of Assam, proposed that the Province should raise a regular regiment of infantry for the Indian Army. His colleagues at once agreed and in due course His Excellency the Governor of Assam, Sir Robert Reid, placed the proposal before the Viceroy, who forwarded it with his support to General Headquarters.

The question of raising an Assam Regiment had now to be examined from the military, as opposed to the political, viewpoint. While it was clearly desirable to encourage the patriotic spirit of Assam and her Ministers, the decision

before General Headquarters was no easy one. At that stage of the war the difficulty in expanding India's peacetime army of 177,000 (to an ultimate strength of over two millions) was not primarily one of man-power. In time of emergency recruits of quality for the armed forces were not lacking but instructors, arms and equipment were all woefully short. Armoured forces and anti-aircraft weapons, which the operations in Europe had proved to be of paramount importance, were in fact almost non-existent. Desperate needs elsewhere on the active fronts came first — it has been said that after Dunkirk when Britain stood alone against Germany, the list of military equipment available in England was submitted to the Prime Minister on half a sheet of notepaper — and for the first eight months of the war only 53,000 volunteers could be accepted, in comparison with an intake which at a later date sometimes rose to 70,000 in one month. Between May and December 1940, the strength of the Indian Army was increased only by a bare 165,000.

Thus, in 1940, the potential fighting value of a new unit enlisted largely from untried personnel had to be most earnestly weighed against the pressing claims of the traditional martial races. After due consideration, General Headquarters finally decided to raise the First Battalion, The Assam Regiment, at Shillong. It is not unlikely that the natural aptitude of the men for service on India's eastern frontier was an important, perhaps a decisive, consideration. If so, it was to be amply justified in the event.

On 30 January 1941 the Governor of Assam was officially informed that a battalion was to be raised and, early in February a press communique was issued to that effect by the Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam.[1]

The officer selected to raise and command the new unit was Major R.C. Howman, O.B.E., then G.S.O. II at General Headquarters. Major Ross Howman had already some background knowledge of the men and the country having

[1]See Appendix I

served with the Burma Rifles (who enlisted Kukis), and as Officer Commanding the Escort to the Naga Hills Expedition of 1926-27.

On arrival at Shillong in April the Commandant-elect was cordially greeted by the governor together with various other military and civil officers. Their attitude then, and throughout the raising period was 'If you need help, come to us and we will do our utmost.' It was fortunate that this was so, for within a few days of his arrival the Commandant-elect was to find his command rapidly retreating into the uncertain future.

The trouble arose over accommodation. The battalion, when raised, was to be located in new lines then under construction at Elephant Falls, some six miles away from Shillong. For a variety of reasons, doubtless sound but most exasperating, Major Howman was informed that it was impossible to complete the lines by 1 July, the date laid down by General Headquarters for the raising of the regiment. The monsoon, he was told, would soon bring the work almost to a standstill and the best that could be promised for a completion date was 1 November 'at the earliest'.

A delay of four months seemed intolerable — somehow the unit had to be raised on time, and a possible plan was taking shape when powerful reinforcements arrived in the robust form of Major W. F. Brown, 8 Punjab Regiment, the Second-in-Command-elect. Major Brown had already served in Assam with the Assam Rifles at both Sadiya and Lokra. His arrival was typical of the man. He was in Chitral when appointed to his new assignment and had promptly loaded his car and driven straight across India to Shillong, camping out at night by the roadside. Hot, thirsty, hungry and tired, he was nevertheless ready within five minutes of arrival to back his superior in any scheme, legal or otherwise, which would forward the justifiable end in view. And so they got down to it.

Their plan had the merit of boldness and simplicity. Briefly it was to take advantage of the customary, though not inevitable, dry spell between the first rains and the

monsoon proper to build temporary lines for the Battalion. The Governor promised an unsecured loan of one thousand rupees to buy bamboos and other essentials; the Inspector General of Police willingly consented to accelerate the despatch of drafts of men from the Assam Rifles to Shillong; the Area Commander, in addition to much material help, stretched his personal authority to the limit, and beyond, to ensure that all hampering rules and regulations should be interpreted by his staff in the most liberal of spirits. Indeed the convenient term 'in anticipation of sanction' covered nearly every activity of this period.

Cheered by these developments, Major Howman left on a quick tour of the Assam Rifles and civil administrative headquarters. It was obviously expedient personally to explain why the Assam Rifles drafts were wanted in such a hurry and also to endeavour to wheedle extra men, particularly some key instructors, out of the Commandants of Assam Rifles units. No commanding officer cares to have his unit milked and it is to the everlasting credit of the Assam Rifles Commandants of those days that, aided and abetted by their Inspector General, they gave most graciously and liberally of their best. Writing later about his tour the Commandant-elect said:

> 'Of their hospitality it need only be said that their guest still cherishes the memory of a very wet and cheerful night at Imphal wedged between two old Subedar friends (a Kuki and a Gorkha) with the Commandant beaming perhaps a little mistily across the table. Old soldiers (said his hosts) remembered that whisky and shot-gun cartridges had become almost unobtainable during the first war, so they had invested a goodly stock of both. Not information to be passed on of course, but if ever the Assam Regiment passed that way . . . . ! Alas, in the event it was a Jap bomb which got there first.'

Back in Shillong the Commandant-elect found that his prospects of changing his title to the simpler one of Com-

manding Officer had considerably improved. A number of officers had arrived and it was part of the good fortune of those early days that they included tea planters D. K. Macfarlane, L. S. Davis and A. D. Cleland, who knew the country and were masters of improvisation. Another notable and welcome arrival was the first Indian Commissioned Officer, M. L. Barua. He was doubly welcomed as the first officer hailing from Assam itself to be posted to the regiment.

Major Brown had meanwhile been cheerfully moving mountains. In a short time shelter for the incoming drafts was found in a variety of places: a camp site was selected and marked out at Kench's Trace, inside the municipal boundary of Shillong, and foraging parties with borrowed transport had raided the plains for bamboos and other hutting materials.

Soon the Assam Rifles drafts began to pour in, but the rains now also began in earnest. It looked as if the gamble had failed and that the drafts would have to return to their units, when at last the hoped-for break came. The rain stopped for forty eight hours and by the end of it the camp was up. There was still much to be done, but the worst was over. A touring senior officer looked around, 'Remarkable', he said, 'I would never have believed it possible'. 'It's the men Sir', someone said. And of course it was.

The Battalion was now, if unofficially, in being, full of enthusiasm and well ahead of schedule. The next step was to suggest to the Governor and Area Commander that the date for raising should be accelerated and brought forward to 15 June. General Headquarters at Delhi may or may not have been approached 'through the usual channels', but it is a matter of history that both Sir Robert Reid and Brigadier Whitworth agreed and after an intensive fortnight of organization, drill and general sprucing up, the inauguration ceremony was held at Government House, Shillong on 15 June 1941. The moving speech given on this occasion by Sir Robert Reid, to whom the regiment owes so much,

brought to fulfilment all the endeavours of the founders of the unit. He said:

'For the first time in history a regiment of the Indian Army has been raised in Assam and has been given the name "Assam Regiment". We wish the nucleus of the regiment good luck in the name of the Province of Assam. It is true that, in the past, two battalions of the Indian Army bore the name "Assam Light Infantry" but the Assam Regiment cannot claim to revive their glories, for they are still with us in the guise of their lineal descendants, the 1st Battalion 6th Gorkhas and 2nd Battalion 8th Gorkhas.

You have the prouder and more arduous task of making your own history and forming your own traditions, and that at a moment when the British Empire is engaged in the greatest struggle of all times, a moment when stout hearts and brawny arms were never more sorely needed in her defence. You differ, too, from those older corps in that, whereas they bore the name of Assam because they were stationed in the Assam Valley, though their men were drawn from Bengal or elsewhere, your recruiting ground is Assam and you are the living symbol of Assam's martial ardour, the embodiment of her physical strength.

This regiment has been raised in response to a claim made on behalf of Assam that she too is fit and able to take an active part in the defence of the realm and in an attack on the forces of evil, that she too, can furnish men as good, if not better than those hailing from any other province. In the last Great War Assam furnished hundreds of fine soldiers who came forward and served with credit in the Gorkha Brigade and earned high praise from those with whom they fought. It was in this knowledge and in this faith that a claim was made on behalf of Assam that she should have her own fighting unit. Now that desire has been realized, the province looks to you with full confidence to justify it.

Wherever you may serve, whether you are sent East or West, we know you will acquit yourselves like men. We are confident that you, the youngest unit of the Indian

Army, will never fail in whatever duty you are called on to perform.

Grand as it is to carry on glorious traditions, it is even grander to make them. Opportunity lies before you so to conduct yourselves, whether in cantonments or in the field, that future generations will recount with awe and with pride the deeds that brought renown to the Assam Regiment in the fiercest struggle the world has ever seen.

You will have to wait, you will have to train yourselves before you are ready to take your place in the Order of Battle, but when that day comes the eyes of all Assam will be on you, and I do not doubt that your steadfastness, your bravery, your skill and your endurance will be such as few will equal and none will surpass.'

On the evening of raising, after a quiet celebration, the Commanding Officer recalls how he somewhat anxiously discussed the future with his Second-in-Command; how the Battalion had that day become a charge upon military, as opposed to civil revenues, and whether those austere and sceptical beings, the 'Military Accounts people', would function 'in anticipation of sanction'. If they refused who would pay, feed and clothe some 400 men? And was there not perhaps a military crime such as '... in that he, in time of war, raised a battalion without permission'?

They finally gave it up and retired thoughtfully to bed, hoping that General Headquarters would be only too glad that someone had got a move on, which was just what happened.

* * * *

In spite of the generous drafts from the Assam Rifles the unit was well under the authorized strength of 719 all ranks. There was now an active Battalion but no Training Centre as yet to feed it with trained recruits. It was known, however, that there were many men in Assam who had served in army or police corps of one sort or another and, with the help of the civil authorities, many such men were

located and persuaded to re-enlist. Most of them proved excellent material.

A more serious problem lay in the inevitable gaps in military knowledge of modern warfare on the part of both officers and men. Most of the former had joined direct from training schools without specialist knowledge, while the latter had had, naturally, no experience of some of the weapons and equipment of a regular unit—not that all of these were yet available.

Pondering over this question the Commanding Officer recalled the good results he had seen obtained in 1918 from training Burma Rifles recruits with British non-commissioned officers. He took this idea to the Area Commander, who as usual met him half way. A signal was sent to District Headquarters asking for Machine-gun, Signal and other specialists from British units. This drew the rejoinder 'Are you satisfied Commanding Officer 1st Assam has given full consideration to language difficulties?' A pacific reply produced in due course the British non-commissioned officers, who proved a tremendous success. They were excellent instructors, and were much impressed with the keenness and cheerfulness of the men. Indeed, in a very short time they and their classes had formed mutual admiration societies on and off parade. In his leisure moments (which were not many) the machine-gun sergeant, a six foot Yorkshireman, was observed to be an enthusiastic pupil of a small Naga who instructed him in the art of 'game' shooting with a crossbow and mud pellets!

Language, as anticipated, offered little difficulty. Soldiers, when they want to, have always been past masters at making themselves understood in strange languages and, moreover, the British and Indian Armies shared a considerable English military vocabulary. This, eked out with Hindustani and what might be termed 'visual aids', enabled all concerned to get on excellently, as so often before in history when men of the two armies have worked or campaigned together.

With the help of the British non-commissioned officers it was now possible to run the Battalion with a skeleton officer cadre and despatch the rest to schools of instruction.

There was no lack of vacancies and the Battalion accepted everything offered and asked for more.

At the same time the Battalion was establishing its identity. Its colours, black and orange, those of Assam, were approved and so was the rhinoceros as its badge. The regimental ladies were pressed into service to knit stocking flashes, and even to manufacture a flag which was proudly hoisted over the Quarter Guard one morning. At this stage no distinctive form of regimental buttons was available, so those of the Assam Rifles, to whom the battalion owed so much, were gratefully adopted. The 'A.R.' applied to both and, traditionally, the emblem of the kukri was no less honoured than that of the dao by the officers and men of the Assam Regiment.

A spirited battle raged round the subject of head-gear. Although Gorkha hats were demanded, the Army offered pith hats. It was felt that these were quite unsuited to the climate of Assam, and once accepted, might take years to get rid of. They were therefore politely declined and the tailors set to work making grey cloth side caps. Gorkha hats were later to be approved but supplies were almost impossible to obtain.

The long standing military association between Gorkhas and the men now enlisted into the Assam Regiment gave rise, at this stage, to a somewhat awkward language problem. Language was a great obstacle in the field of recruiting especially where the Nagas were concerned and at one stage it was seriously considered stopping recruitment of men from the interior of the Naga Hills. A lingua franca to help weld together the diverse tribes of the Battalion was essential and perhaps the easiest solution would have been to adopt Gorkhali, which the majority already spoke and freely used on parade. This course was tempting, as when raising a unit in time of war considerations of speed and simplicity are of great, and often paramount, importance. On the other hand, looking further ahead, Roman Urdu possessed overwhelming advantages and a Battalion Order was therefore published forbidding the use of Gorkhali.

As a compromise however the study of English training manuals was encouraged in the case of those, notably Lushais, Khasis and some Assamese, who already had a good knowledge of the language, and were thereby enabled to attend courses, otherwise debarred to them, in the British Wings of schools of instruction.

In the midst of such training dilemma a third regular officer, Captain L. St. J.D. Collinson, joined the Battalion with the knowledge and experience necessary to organize and train Headquarters Company. Best of all he was an expert on all that pertained to machine-guns, and a brief account of the training of the machine-gun personnel merits inclusion as a classic example of improvisation during those early days.

At the start the sole equipment consisted of a Gale and Polden diagram, bamboo and lead 'mock up' ammunition boxes and two trophy machine-guns dating from World War I. These vintage weapons, one German and the other Turkish, had been captured by a Gorkha battalion at Gaza in the Palestine campaign of 1917, and had apparently received an annual coating of paint ever since. They were spotted one day outside their owner's quarter guard and were then lent as a noble gesture towards the war effort on the understanding that they were to be returned in the same condition as received. One can only hope that they were, as our machine gunners promptly got to work on them with hammers and cold chisels in an attempt to induce some part of them to move!

At Kench's Trace all bachelor officers lived in camp, and it was customary for the few married officers, whose wives had joined them, to live there also alongside their men for much of the time. As those on courses returned and more officers were posted, the need was felt for a mess and a nearby small bungalow was acquired — no easy feat in wartime overcrowded Shillong. Although for a start the mess was somewhat primitive, the peace-time conventions, so important in building up esprit de corps, were observed when possible. An initial impossibility was found to be the

provision of adequate cutlery and seating accommodation in the ante-room on the first guest night on 11 September 1941, to which a distinguished company headed by the Governor had rather ambitiously been invited. The harassed mess committee rightly decided that distinctions would be invidious, so probably for the first and the last time in their lives in a regular army mess, various exalted personages tackled well-buttered corn cobs with their fingers and later sat on cushions for coffee on the floor of the ante-room. In spite of, or because of this, the evening was a huge success. A few days later a notable addition to the mess was a very handsome silver statuette of a rhinoceros generously presented by the Governor. The statuette had been skilfully modelled to the Governor's order by the Calcutta firm of Hamilton & Co. from an original in the Darjeeling museum. At the same time the Governor also presented the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment with a large silver cigarette box and a well-known tea planter and visiting agent of Assam, Mr. Gyles Mackrell, made a gift of a pair of large boar's tusks from his hunting trophy collection. These two trophies were subsequently handed over to the Assam Regiment Centre on its raising. The Assam Valley Light Horse and other organizations in Assam also contributed generously to the adornment of the new mess.

The Battalion was now fast settling down, and although a great deal of basic training was to be done, it was felt that it would be good for everyone to carry out a few simple field exercises. Company manoeuvres in the first instance were quickly followed by battalion route marches and a full scale battalion exercise. The latter, despite various set-backs, including trouble over trespassing on the Government farm at Elephant Falls, provided a break from routine and served to keep up everyone's enthusiasm in the training programme right up to the time of the Battalion's first move of the war — to the Elephant Falls camp. During the exercise the 'enemy', who included the British non-commissioned officers, had the time of their lives, the Battalion tied itself up in knots, and certain harassed officers reached an all

time high in profanity. But the break away from routine had the desired tonic effect on the whole camp.

★ ★ ★ ★

The move to Elephant Falls was slightly premature because the camp and lines were still unfinished, but it was felt necessary that the unit should have a proper home as soon as possible. Some of the shortcomings, especially the dampness of the buildings, were hard to bear but, by and large, the Battalion was rather more comfortable than before and indoor training proved a great deal easier.

There was even a covered shed for the vintage chassis, bought from a local garage and with which the Transport Officer, Lieutenant R. D. Cooksey, endeavoured to demonstrate the mysteries of the internal combustion engine to his puzzled but unexpectedly receptive classes. As someone truly remarked, the hillman leaps the gap between bamboo and the battery with remarkable facility. Later the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment recruited a number of Khasis, who had a natural aptitude for mechanical things, and they proved a great asset to the platoon. Nevertheless, at this stage, driving instruction on the Shillong roads in decrepit vehicles was a nightmare, and was to become worse when an Army Order arrived stating that all officers in every unit had to be able to ride a motor bicycle. On one occasion the Subedar Major chose to arrive on one at a football match in grand style, pressed the wrong lever and, watched by several hundred fascinated troops, plunged into a very wet ditch.

Shortly after the move to Elephant Falls fate intervened. There was only one other active battalion in Shillong, the 3rd Battalion 8th Gorkha Rifles which was six months ahead of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment in date of raising. The Gorkha's role was to move to the eastern frontier at forty-eight hours' notice in the event of an emergency. Then one day they were earmarked to join a field formation in Western India, and the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was left to take over their emergency tasks. This meant that the

Battalion at once got priority for equipment, and soon such legendary items as 3-inch mortars began to arrive.

When all appeared to be going well, a cloud appeared on the horizon. The 1st Battalion Assam Regiment had hitherto been happily free from either internal or external distractions of a domestic or political nature. Health had been excellent except for some malaria; crime was virtually non-existent and, above all, every class enlisted had worked with the others in the greatest amity. It would have been most difficult, as well as militarily undesirable, for a unit raising at speed in the conditions described to have formed 'class' companies or platoons, with all the resulting complications of postings, separate cook-houses, messes, etc. The policy had therefore been from the outset to mix all classes, though with due regard to fair representation as regards appointments and promotions. This was made possible by the great good sense of a representative committee, presided over by the Subedar Major, Devi Singh Mech, which unanimously decided that if all cooks were Hindu all classes would be satisfied to live, sleep and eat together. The cloud which now appeared was a memorandum advocating, doubtless for sound political reasons, the immediate enlistment of Sylheti Muslims into the Assam Regiment.

From the military point of view, the difficulty of training a fresh intake of men at that stage was obvious. More serious were the domestic difficulties and frictions which were certain to arise. The conclusion reached by the Commanding Officer after consultation was that if the Assam Regiment had to accept Muslims at that juncture its progress towards fitness for active service would be seriously retarded. A strong representation on these lines was forwarded to higher authority and nothing more was ever heard of the project.

High amongst the Battalion's new amenities at Elephant Falls was a full-sized football field. There was plenty of good material amongst the men as well as the officers. After several narrow defeats the Battalion team, amidst tremendous excitement, succeeded in defeating a strong Gorkha Training

Centre team by three goals to one. As may be imagined this gave a considerable boost to morale.

In a more serious vein, a start was made with field firing and tactical exercises using live ammunition. The intention was to give all ranks as early as possible the feel of their weapons under service conditions and to revert later to filling in the gaps left in their preliminary training. A pleasing outcome was the Area Commander's decision, after watching some of those exercises, that the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was capable of giving demonstrations to Tactical Training Courses then assembled in Shillong.

By 20 November the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment had received much of its essential equipment, with the exception of vehicles, and a series of tests proved that the mobilization scheme had passed from the realms of headings, blanks and theory into those of practicability. It was well, for great events were just over the horizon.

War came suddenly on Sunday morning, 7 December 1941, with the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbour, followed the next day by their landing at Kelantan in the Malay Peninsular. Three days later, a day of fresh and staggering British reverses in South East Asia, the Commanding Officer was informed that his unit, the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was to mobilize immediately and move to Digboi.

After a great deal of excitement and packing up, the first part of the Battalion, A Company under command of Captain Cleland, moved off on 11 December; the rest of the Battalion followed hard after. It was just six months since the unit had come into being, and it now began its career in earnest and looked to the future with full confidence.

CHAPTER II

THE EASTERN FRONTIER

January 1941—February 1943

DIGBOI, the town to which the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment now moved, was the headquarters of the Assam Oil Company and lay less than 50 miles from the frontier of Burma. Except for Dibrugarh, a main river steamer port on the banks of the Brahmaputra River, it was the only town of any size or importance in Upper Assam. The 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was, therefore, soon faced with the task of drawing up a complete plan for the defence and protection of the town.

The primary task of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment at Digboi was to defend the Assam Oil Company's property against attack by Japanese parachute troops. It had been appreciated that the Japanese might attempt to put the oil fields temporarily out of production by destroying vital but repairable plants rather than resort to bombing which might long deny the oil to the Japanese themselves, should they later capture the fields.

To assist him in his task, Lieutenant-Colonel Howman was given both air and artillery support though, perforce, of a somewhat unusual nature for the task in hand.

Air support was to be supplied by a flight of Audaxes, a handy but very slow and semi-obsolete aircraft of the familiar type used for many years for army co-operation and other general purposes on India's North-West Frontier.

Artillery support was to be provided by the 1st Indian Anti-Aircraft Battery. The men were largely stalwart Punjabi Mussalmans and it was an interesting commentary on the diversity of the great Indian Army of the war that neither unit had seen anything quite like their comrades-in-arms before. Each inspected the other with marked,

though friendly, curiousity. The battery had been trained in Karachi on the only anti-aircraft guns then in India, to be reformed at Digboi with 18-pounder field guns. Highly extraordinary weapons for the task in hand, but apparently nothing else was obtainable.

The Battery Commander, Major George Sherriff, lost no time in pursuading his weapons to fulfil a role of which their original designers had never dreamt. At a planning conference he hazarded a guess that his shells might be induced to reach an extreme ceiling of 3,000 feet, but what might happen to his guns when fired at a necessarily highly unnatural angle he did not care to say. However, he stated that he proposed to find out as soon as possible. A few days later when the news of the arrival of proper static anti-aircraft guns came through, a sigh of relief went up in the Digboi area.

In the tented camp which now served to house the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment everyone soon settled down quite happily. Events had moved so rapidly for the unit ever since it had been raised that, for the moment, an air of unreality hung over the camp — it seemed almost as if the Battalion was out on just another field training exercise. But as the days passed so did the inadequacy of the camp reveal itself. Strenuous efforts were made to improve the sanitary arrangements and cook-house facilities. Beds and bedding were in somewhat short supply but the battle for their procurement went on. Meanwhile no time was wasted in resuming training and putting to test and into practice some of the ideas contained in the scheme for the defence of Digboi.

When the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment left Shillong its old friends, the British non-commissioned officers, had to remain behind. Now when new equipment started to arrive their guidance was sorely missed. It was not long before the first 15-cwt. truck which the Battalion could truly call its own arrived and was quickly followed by more transport to give the Transport Platoon two-thirds of its requirements.

However, it is doubtful if this issue of military equipment was fully appreciated by the townsfolk of Digboi. Most of

the drivers were still very inexperienced and the roads in and around Digboi are narrow. At the best of times, a bullock-cart is a difficult thing to pass and so they proved to the unskilful Kukis, Lushais and Nagas who attempted the operation. There were also several awkwardly narrow bridges in the area and the Transport Officer had many moments of anxiety when a truck left the vehicle standings.

However, relations with the citizens of Digboi were most cordial. Provided the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment did not obtrude unduly on the activities of those responsible for the smooth running of the oil fields it was left much to its own devices. And so the time came for the Battalion to prepare for its first Christmas. This was celebrated with all the trimmings possible and ended with a gala performance of tribal songs and dances to which a host of guests from the surrounding district had been invited. This, the first of many such occasions, delighted its audience and drew from them great applause. From then onwards the men were firmly established in the affections of all members of the oil company.

As the new year approached, so did the scope of the Battalion's activities increase. For several years before the outbreak of hostilities the need for a connecting link between the road and railway systems of India and those of Burma had been felt. Little active work had however been done on the project, nor had the route even been decided on by the time the Japanese invaded Malaya. One of the possible routes now under review ran east from Digboi through Ledo, the railhead of the Assam Bengal Railway, and thence over the border hills separating the plains of Assam from the Hukawng Valley of Burma. Across this jungle-covered and little-known tract of country, more than 200 miles in extent, lay Myitkyina, the rail and river steamer terminus on the great Irrawaddy River. It was now proposed that the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment should begin reconnaissance of the first stretch of this route and report on the country as far, if possible, as Shingbwiyang, half-way across the Valley.

While plans for this work were still at the talking stage, a great disappointment befell the Battalion. On his return

to the camp one day the Commanding Officer was met by Major Brown. 'You aren't going to like the news, Sir', said the Second-in-Command, and then went on to hand over a signal from Area Headquarters instructing Lieutenant-Colonel Howman to hand over his command to the next senior officer and proceed immediately to take up an important staff appointment at General Headquarters at New Delhi. It was certain that the Commanding Officer did not like the news at all, but efforts to have the posting cancelled or delayed failed, and the situation had reluctantly to be accepted.

On 27 December Lieutenant-Colonel Ross Howman, who had nursed and coaxed the Battalion into being and had moulded it to the likeness of a sound active unit, said goodbye to his officers and men. Everyone wished him well in his new appointment and all hoped that he would continue to interest himself in the affairs of the Regiment. This hope certainly came true—no greater friend or worker to further the interests of the Regiment could ever have been found.

As he went to the railway station later that day accompanied by Major Brown, he passed one of the Battalion trucks partly submerged in one of Digboi's emergency water tanks. 'I hope your Battalion won't get into trouble for fouling the drinking water' he said to the new Commanding Officer and Major Brown was left wondering what the future was to hold for him.

So, as the train pulled out of the station, another stage of the history of the Battalion came to a close.

* * * *

It was not until well into the new year that the first reconnaissance patrols moved out into the Patkoi Hills. As a preliminary step, an advanced Battalion headquarters had been set up a short distance outside Ledo, leaving the bulk of the unit behind at Digboi to continue training under the direction of the new Second-in-Command, Major Collinson.

Ordnance survey maps of the border region were generally

inaccurate, out of date and of little use; also there seemed to be no one locally available with any knowledge of what the country was like across the frontier. Patrol commanders, therefore, were left very much to devise their own methods of how best to achieve their task of discovery after setting out in a given direction. Prominent amongst the patrol commanders was the Commanding Officer himself, who took out one of the first columns.

Away for two, three and sometimes as long as four weeks, the patrols, living on the country for the most part, penetrated deeply into the Hukawng Valley. In the hills they met and made friends with the Naga tribes of the frontier area. Then, after dropping down to the plains only isolated villages and travelling bands of Kachins were encountered, for the Hukawng Valley is a land of sickness and hardship which the peoples of Burma have through the ages distrusted and avoided whenever possible. The malaria mosquito, the leech and many other repulsive jungle insects and reptiles hold complete dominion there.

As the patrols returned to the Ledo base, they were ferried back to Digboi in motor transport to rest and clean themselves up before joining the training cadres which had been kept up throughout this period.

They were replaced by fresh platoons whose men were keen and eager to go out and push further eastwards ahead of the widening circle now being covered by the Battalion operations.

This was ideal training for the men. It taught them to work as a team, to endure a certain amount of hardship, and, above all, created in many a sense of leadership and responsibility. The health of the troops so engaged remained fairly good, except for an increasing incidence of malaria. Insect-repellent ointments were always carried and freely used, so was quinine, but it seemed an impossible task to prevent some of the men from becoming infected.

Throughout February and March patrols went out. Knowledge concerning the area grew and detailed reports were compiled and sent back to Area Headquarters. Little

did the Battalion then know that it was in fact mapping out the initial stages of what later became the famed Stilwell Road — a vital part in the future Allied strategy of South-East Asia. While the great labour force employed on the road was being organized, companies of the Battalion, based for a short while at the railhead of Tipang, gave assistance in the construction of the road. They were also called upon to carry supplies to the patrols going out into the Patkoi Hills until the arrival of a mule company in the area.

News came through at this time that General Headquarters, India, had at last given final approval for the raising of a second battalion for the regiment, and this was received with great satisfaction. Work was begun immediately on preparing drafts of non-commissioned officers and men who would form the nucleus of the new unit in Shillong. Major I. N. Macleod, who had joined the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment a few weeks earlier was selected to command the new battalion and with him went Captain Macfarlane and several other more recently posted officers. Subedar Major Devi Sing Mech was also selected to go to Shillong so that the new battalion should benefit fully from the great experience he could offer concerning the initial difficulties encountered by the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment. His place was taken by Subedar Major Open Chandra Mech, a stern disciplinarian and a man well liked by the officers and men of the unit.

Then on 4 April came the sudden order from Area Headquarters for the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment to close all its patrols on Ledo, to complete mobilization and be prepared to move to Dimapur (Manipur Road) in order to join the 1st Brigade of 23rd Indian Infantry Division by 25 April. Reports of the alarming situation developing in Burma had been reaching the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment for some time, but, could it be that the unit was going to be given a chance to prove itself already? The spirit of adventure was high amongst all ranks and the news of the impending move was received with enthusiasm.

Before the lst Battalion Assam Regiment takes its place in the order of battle on another sector of the eastern frontier, the wider picture of events in Burma up to April 1942 must be considered.

The lightning campaign of conquest in Malaya was followed up when the Japanese turned their attention towards Burma, and before the end of January, the port and base of Moulmein had fallen to them. Tactics used to encircle and bring about the destruction of the allied forces in Malaya were employed again against the Burma Army, and again with complete success. The Japanese advance continued and quickened as it was supported by a weight of air power far superior to anything available to the Allies at that time.

On 5 March, General Sir Harold Alexander arrived in Rangoon to assume command of all forces in Burma, and the city, which had been subjected to numerous air attacks, was evacuated on the following day. From then onwards it was a case of steady withdrawal northwards. Chinese formations under General J. Stilwell (United States Army) and units of the Burma Army fought gallant covering actions, but the result was always the same — disengagement and hasty retreat. By the end of April Mandalay was clear of all troops and all the country south of the Irrawaddy was in Japanese hands. Two of the central spans of the great Ava bridge over the river were blown up on the evening of 30 April.

Once across the river, the Allied plan was to withdraw on the Chindwin and thence escape to Imphal in Manipur, where it was hoped to find a covering screen of fresh troops. The Japanese exploited their advantages to the full and every mile of the dense jungle that the Burma Army traversed was littered with the wrecks of vehicles that had broken down under the strain.

As the days progressed into May, it became a race not only against the Japanese but also against the monsoon. At last, Shwegyin on the Chindwin was reached and operations to ferry the army across to the west bank to Kalewa began.

Loading was painfully slow and was hampered by continuous Japanese bombing. All heavy armoured vehicles had to be destroyed on the east bank, and two days after the first monsoon rains fell, on 12 May the last of the troops was across the river.

Dysentery and malaria had taken heavy toll and added greatly to the battle casualties of the Burma Army. In torrential rain and in conditions which would have tried the fittest of troops the final stages of the withdrawal up the Kabaw Valley were carried out. Very little in the way of armament, equipment or transport had been brought out. Chaos and weakness was everywhere as the head of the column intermingled with a staggering stream of civilian refugees.

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23rd Indian Infantry Division, nicknamed later the 'Fighting Cock Division' because of its formation sign, was raised on New Year's Day, 1942 at Jhansi under Major-General R. A. Savory, D.S.O., M.C., a veteran of the Western Desert campaign of Sidi Barrani and of Keren in Eritrea. Many of its units had been hastily mobilized, all were short of equipment and few had trained with modern weapons, or in modern warfare against a first class enemy. But the seriousness of the situation on the eastern frontier demanded that urgent measures be taken with all possible speed. The division therefore began to gather piecemeal in Assam to carry out its commander's directive:

'23rd Indian Division will (*a*) Stop the Japanese invading India,
and (*b*) Defeat them if they do.'

The advance party of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment set off from Digboi under command of Captain Bholasingh Lama and the main party followed hard after on 15 April.

At Dimapur the Battalion met its new brigade under Brigadier F. V. R. Woodhouse, who had arrived a few days previously with orders to push on to Imphal and beyond to

cover the withdrawal of the Burma Army as soon as his command was assembled and complete. Should the Japanese follow on across the Chindwin the situation would indeed be grave and the 1st Brigade was told to prepare for battle.

Conditions at Dimapur were frightful. Parties of refugees in their thousands, fleeing with nothing but their lives from Burma, had camped around the town before passing on. Many had died there and putrifying corpses lay by the roadside or in the undergrowth nearby, unburied and obscene. Hundreds of others, sick, starving and near to death, clustered about the camps set up for them by various military or tea planter organizations. Meanwhile the rain ceaselessly pounded the earth and there was no shelter for the incoming unit but the virgin jungle. Certainly, the sepoy who looked around him and exclaimed, '*Bandobast bilkul nahin hai*' could be forgiven — everybody shared his sentiments in this summing up of the situation.

Writing of this period, a divisional historian recalls the arrival of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment:

> 'Some slight relief was provided by the appearance of 1st Assam Regiment, which had been ordered to come under command of 1st Brigade on its arrival in Assam in place of a battalion left behind in India. Where there was so much confusion it was no small relief to find the unit in position at the appointed time and the discovery that it was complete with transport which made its appearance doubly welcome.'

And so the Battalion was ordered forward together with the 7th Battalion 14th Punjab Regiment and the 1st Battalion Patiala Regiment to Tamu. D Company formed the advance party under Captain Bholasingh Lama having moved out in motor transport before the arrival of the Battalion at Dimapur.

The march to Manipur began on 19 April when the first of the three echelons, into which 1st Battalion Assam Regiment had been formed for the purpose, set out under Captain G. B. Thurgood. The march was to be completed by stages — fifteen and upwards miles apart according to the availability

of suitable camping sites along the route. With the columns went engineer, signal and medical detachments in addition to troops of 24 Indian Mule Company. All marches had to be done by night so as not to interfere in any way with the feverish activity taking place on the road. Hundreds of Nagas -- Angamis, Aos, Semas and Lothas from distant villages — were busy hacking away at the hillside to make it fit and safe for vehicular traffic.

As the columns climbed higher into the hills so did the steamy heat of the plains recede. Although the road was rough the men were fit and happy to have left the terrible conditions of Dimapur behind them. By night the villages of Piphema and Zubza were no more to the marching columns than a mass of twinkling lights on the hillside above and the pungent smell of wood fires. And on they went until Kohima was reached and passed.

The men rested as much as possible by day. There was little time for sight-seeing, but those who were seeing the hills for the first time wondered at the beauty of it all. Was it possible they thought, that soon they might be called on to fight in the unspoiled loveliness of the jungle covered slopes above them or amongst the terraced rice cultivations below? It was wonderful to look out on the hills swathed in the mists of the early morning and later to watch the villages appearing as the sun warmed the earth — to hear the rhythmic cries of the Nagas as they laboured, the ringing of their picks and axes as the steel bit into rock and wood.

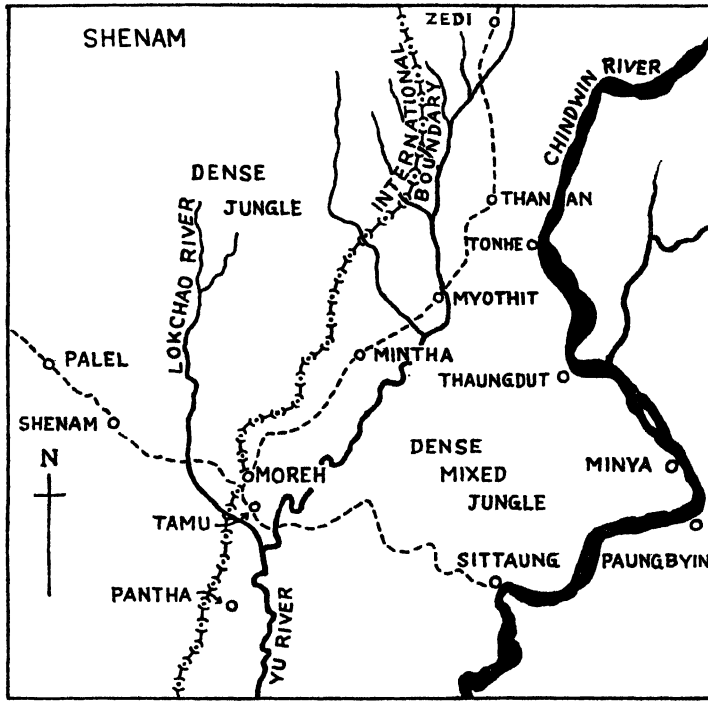
Mao Songsang, Karong and Kanglatongbi were names on the map, and again passed during the night as the march lengthened and columns dropped gradually down to the Manipur plateau. Imphal, the Manipuri capital, was the tenth camp of the journey and was reached by the third echelon, under Captain B.S. Sahi, on the last day of April after having made a forced march of over 30 miles the previous night to make good a day lost earlier owing to sickness amongst the mule train. By that time the first echelon had reached Palel and a distance of 160 miles had been covered.

The Division Commander had already been forward to examine the situation on the Burma Army front. As he passed over the heights separating the plain of Imphal from the Kabaw Valley in which Tamu lay, and along which the army was retiring, he was impressed by the great natural defensive lay-out that the Shenam ridge presented. Even before he had gone further it was possible that he had already decided that if his division had to defend India this was the place where his troops would dig in.

At that time no one knew whether the 1st Brigade would have to fight a desperate battle a few days ahead. The Japanese had very much the whip hand and it appeared that the choice would be theirs. They had been on the heels of the retiring army up to the Chindwin and it might be that, despite the length of their communications, they would find the means to cross the river and resume the advance. Any concentration of troops in the flat country around Tamu would be militarily unsound except as a holding point until all units of the Burma Army had passed through. On 4 May, 1st Battalion less D Company was ordered to move up from Shenam in motor transport and adopt this holding role at Tamu. As the Studebaker trucks swayed and skidded up the difficult road to cover the 39 mile journey, it seemed incredible that six-wheeler vehicles could hold to the narrow track and not plunge over the precipitous *khud*.

All this while the Burma Army was coming through and so were thousands of refugees. On arrival at Tamu, the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment found that the rear-guard of the exodus was approaching the village, and, for the moment at least, the Japanese did not seem to be following up. As the remnants of battle-weary troops cleared the Kabaw Valley the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was ordered back to Shenam, there to prepare defensive positions with other units of the brigade, whose number had been increased to four battalions by the inclusion of the 1st Seaforth Highlanders, collected on the way up from the Kohima area. At Shenam, on 10 May, the men of the Battalion had their first glimpse of Japanese aircraft when a formation of over

thirty Japanese bombers droned past in the direction of Imphal. Shenam was to become the home base of the brigade during the many anxious months which lay ahead. The troops were to know it very very well. They christened it the 'Saddle' and nicknamed Laimatol Hill 'Gibraltar' and its twin 'Malta'. During the months ahead they knew all its moods — the fury of the storms and the bitterness of the morning chill, the evening mists and the clouds.



SCALE : 1 INCH = 20 MILES

By 20 May, the last of the Burma Army had struggled through and, after the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment had covered the dismantling operations of the Lokchao bridge, all that remained between India and the might of Japan in Burma was one brigade and the nucleus of the incomplete IV

Corps assembling slowly in the rear. However, the troops were much too busy to have time to think on such matters.

To bring home to all ranks the gravity of the situation confronting them and to lay down future policy Major-General Savory issued the following orders on 23 May:

'1. The Burma Army has passed through.
2. The 23rd Indian Infantry Division is now charged with the defence of this part of the frontier of India.
3. The following will be borne in mind by every man of the Division:
   (*a*) The safety of India depends on you.
   (*b*) The enemy will be constantly watched by day and night.
   (*c*) He will be outflanked and surrounded whenever possible and destroyed.
   (*d*) There will be no withdrawal.'

★ ★ ★ ★

Once the position at Shenam had been mapped out and the task of digging in put in hand, it became necessary to seek out the Japanese and try to regain contact with them. Reports came through, mainly from refugee sources, of about three battalions deployed around Kalewa with armoured and artillery support, and of a further concentration taking place higher up the Chindwin at Homalin. A forward screen was therefore to be thrown out to check on this information and the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was picked as the first to go out.

In outlining the general plan to cover the area Mintha, Sittaung and across the Chindwin to Wetkauk, the Division Commander questioned the Commanding Officer closely on the ability and experience of his troops, adding: 'If you run into trouble I'm afraid we won't be able to help you much.' With the supreme confidence that characterized so much of what he did, the Commanding Officer answered: 'My men will go anywhere, Sir. If it's into the jungle so

much the better. They were born in it and know how to handle it.'

For the next two months small parties made their way eastwards.[1] As far as possible, they travelled in disguise as ordinary villagers, adopting Kuki costumes or just wearing shirts and shorts, made to look anything but part of military uniform. They carried nothing whatever with them, but, lived out in the jungle and on what little they could procure from the few villages they visited. As the weeks passed, so were ration dumps secretly established at recognized points, but monsoon conditions made this an unprofitable business.

The entire area covered by the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment in the course of the next two months was found to be free of the Japanese and consequently no contact was established with them. Although there were then no battle causalties the unit had to contend with a very high rate of sickness due to dysentery, malaria and foot-rot when the patrols returned to the Shenam base. Malaria was by far the worst and the drain it caused on the unit increased as the weeks went by — there was nothing at hand to prevent infection in those days before the introduction of mepacrine as part of the soldier's daily rations on the eastern frontier. There was a steady stream of both officers and men to and from the Casualty Clearing Station at Imphal. Cerebral malaria, caught in the dreaded Kabaw Valley, was also responsible for the first fatal casualty suffered by the Battalion on active service, when Sepoy Thesi Angami died of it before he could be carried back to the patrol base. With the start of the monsoon rains in the month of May, living conditions at Shenam became extremely difficult. The newly constructed road was constantly being breached, disrupting communications and supplies. The troops had to conserve their rations, and, for a time, the ration scale was reduced by more than half. The men of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment were however able to supplement their meagre fare with jungle roots and herbs with which they were instinctively familiar. The supply of water also became

[1] See Appendix II

a great problem. It had to be conveyed by motor transport from Palel, twelve miles away. Frequent landslides, mud and slush obstructed the running of vehicles almost daily. There was an acute shortage of clothing and the troops were hampered with much of their unserviceable equipment which could not be replaced for many months.

In the monsoon, the jungle can be a treacherous place when the paths are slippery and rivers are terrifying obstacles which must be crossed. Men could easily be carried away and lost in the swirling torrent, as was discovered by Lieutenant M. G. Williamson, when he crossed the Lokchao river on one occasion. Lance-Naik Lalzuiliana Lushai slipped from the slender wire bridge and fell wearing full equipment into the swollen river. Immediately, Subedar Khagendra Nath and Naik Dharamsing Kachari, at great risk to themselves, went in after him and, aided by the patrol commander, finally succeeded in saving him from certain death. Shaken, but undismayed, the patrol then continued on its way. On another occasion, Lieutenant Williamson, in an attempt to get his patrol across the same river, tied a rope around his body and tried to swim across. He was soon in difficulties and was washed down-stream with the swift current of the river but was eventually saved from further mishap by prompt action on the part of his men.

For the most part the countryside was deserted. The Burmese civil population kept very much to their villages, but from time to time patrols would stumble on the pathetic sight of a former refugee camp. The smell of death would then be everywhere and the unsightly remains of men, women and small children would be discovered in all the tragedy of their fate. The very scavenger beasts of the jungle seemed to avoid these places for they were seldom seen or heard in the vicinity.

Minthami, Tonhe, Pantha — all names of villages passed and repassed by the Battalion during this period of ceaseless movement, raiding and reporting before it was relieved by the 1st Battalion Patiala Regiment and returned to Shenam to occupy wet and muddy positions on 'Malta' — are

names few of those taking part in the 1942 operations will easily forget. When they did go back, the men were tired and dirty but they had done a good job and fully deserved the praise bestowed on them by the Division Commander.

Leave was now opened again, as it was assumed that the Japanese did not intend pushing through to India but had left only a small force to cover Kalewa, while the bulk of their 33rd Division had been withdrawn to the Mandalay area. But the leave quota was only 10% of the 'present strength'. Sickness continued to drain the unit of personnel and so, in the end, only 40 men managed to get away. Meanwhile the process of refitting and retraining was linked with the brigade training at Palel. Two rifle companies at a time went to Palel to rest and clean up before resuming field training.

Field-firing, watermanship and co-operation with other arms were only part of the scheme of things. All ranks were put through a rigorous programme lasting from dawn to dusk. New officers from training schools or on posting from the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment joined in and several others were sent off on various courses of instruction in India.

On 5 September, the first part of the training reached its climax when the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment took part in a brigade exercise. But how pitifully short in numbers the unit looked when mustering prior to the start of the scheme. Later, as the attack developed, an irate staff officer demanded to be told why a bren-gun group should be wandering about on its own, isolated from the rest of the company. 'That's not a bren group, Sir' he was told, 'That's a complete section.' And when it was all over the Battalion went back to the wind and the cold and the mud of Shenam. Everybody hoped that the monsoon would soon be over so that a repetition of short rations after the collapse of part of the Manipur road would not again be experienced and also so that supplies of warm clothing and other replacements could be obtained.

* * * *

The activities of the Battalion during the month that followed are summarized for us in the extract from the War Diary in which the Adjutant, Captain R. H. Cronin, writes:

> 'Since the redisposition of the Battalion on 4 October the unit has been busily engaged on defence works in the Battalion area. There has been nothing noteworthy to report. Weather was very wet during the first half of the month but cleared during the latter half and was then sunny but cold at night, having all the appearance of the 'cold weather' season's approach. Men are being issued with warm clothing but sickness continues to claim a large proportion. Leave, on a 10% basis, continues, and there are many demands for personnel for courses. The shortage of paper is acute and lack of forms, stationery and office equipment generally is a hindrance with ever increasing office work.'

And so through November to December when the Battalion again went out on training exercises around Shuganu. Down hills, across the valleys and up the other side the men were led by their completely indefatigable Commanding Officer. Then, they joined forces with the 1st Battalion Patiala Regiment to carry out combined exercises. These were spoilt, however, by a series of motor accidents which placed several men on the casualty list and resulted in one driver being killed when his truck toppled over the *khud*.

Christmas 1942 found the Battalion back at Shenam and although spent quietly, the troops managed to get some enjoyment out of the day. Their habitual cheerfulness was hard to dampen and it was well that it was so, for they had had much to contend with during the past monsoon months.

* * * *

After the monsoon, the long vigil and waiting period for 23rd Indian Infantry Division came again. The 49th Brigade moved forward to Tamu in the autumn to begin

road construction in preparation to receive columns of long range penetration troops which were expected to pass that way in the spring of the following year.

As the time drew near for the arrival of these mystery columns the forward concentration of the 1st Brigade began on 23 January, and 1st Battalion Assam Regiment returned to its old hunting grounds along the banks of the Chindwin. Its orders were to cover the area between Sittaung and Tonhe, while the Patialas and the Seaforths looked after the Tamu area.

Then ensued a month of intensive patrol activity with little rest for anyone, but the weather was fine and the troops in high spirits. An extract from the War Diary serves to give some idea of the tempo of operations.

'2 February Subedar Kaliprasad left with 12 Indian Other Ranks to carry out local reconnaissance of Chindwin.

3 February Lieutenant Stock returned after completing special reconnaissance patrol to the Chindwin.

4 February Jemadar Bawilawra sent out with 12 Indian Other Ranks on reconnaissance patrol to the Chindwin.

5 February Lieutenant Corlett left with 4 men on special patrol.

6 February Jemadar Lalthanzama took out a patrol of 14 men to maintain watch on the Chindwin.'

And so it went on right through the month. Patrols came in as others went out. There was every hope that the long range columns, now identified as Brigadier Orde Wingate's 'Chindit' Brigade, would cross the river unobserved for none of the patrols had contacted the Japanese in spite of penetrating many miles inland on the east bank. In fact, at one time, most of the Battalion was concentrated east of the river around Paungbyin after having crossed over in country craft or on a variety of home-made rafts. There

a surprise pounce by Captain Sahi's patrol on Minya, produced the valuable scalp of San Doke, a collaborator with the Japanese.

But the pace was in fact greater than the resources of the men could stand. Many of those sent to hospital had not returned after several weeks' absence and very few reinforcements seemed to be coming from the small Training Company now established at Shillong. Although the Battalion was desperately under-strength all ranks were still game to continue operations, and the possibility that the unit might be withdrawn from the eastern frontier was not welcomed. The Commanding Officer took the line that so long as all men were out on patrol he would avoid the critical eye of the Division Commander for a while longer. But this was good only up to the end of the month.

After the Wingate columns had successfully passed through, Major-General Savory took stock of his command. He reluctantly concluded that the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment would have to be relieved and sent to a rear area where it could train without interruption, and above all bring itself up to strength. It was with the deepest disappointment that the Battalion now said goodbye to its many friends in 23rd Indian Infantry Division and the 1st Brigade in particular.

The place of 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was taken over by the 1st Battalion 16th Punjab Regiment. On 1 March, the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment left Moreh and Burma behind it, and moved in motor transport back past Lokchao and the mists of Shenam. 'Malta' and 'Gibraltar' fell behind as the convoy dropped down to the Imphal plain and thence moved swiftly along the Manipur road. They had marched up that same road some seventeen months previously to do a job, and it was with the full satisfaction of a task well done that they now moved back from the eastern frontier.

CHAPTER III

RETURN TO DIGBOI

March 1943 — February 1944

THE MOVE to Digboi during the first and second weeks of March was completed when 1st Battalion Assam Regiment took over the Grazing Ground Camp on 10 March, relieving the 1st Battalion 8th Gorkha Rifles. Local guards and other station duties were numerous, and, in its depleted state, the Battalion was unable to fulfil all the obligations assumed by its predecessor. Only essential guards were found within the oilfields, and station duties were cut to a minimum.

Before leaving 23rd Indian Infantry Division, the Commanding Officer received a communication from Major-General Savory which provided the basis and incentive behind all that Lieutenant-Colonel Brown and his officers set out to accomplish during the ensuing months. The letter read:

> 'I am genuinely sorry that your Battalion is leaving the 23rd Indian Division. I tried, as you know, to get two complete companies from a Gorkha Regiment transferred to you, but the proposal was not accepted. Instead, you are to go where you will be able to absorb and train reinforcements better than in the conditions under which we are living here. It will be a good opportunity and you will not lose by it.
>
> I am very grateful to you and your officers and men for the good work you have done, particularly during the period immediately after the withdrawal of the Burma Army. Will you please tell them so and wish them all from me the best of luck. I hope we may soon serve together again.'

With the Battalion pitifully under strength and most poorly equipped, the task of forging a new fighting force

was not easy. There was little hope of obtaining adequate reinforcements from Shillong, and it was generally accepted that the Battalion would remain in a rearward area for several months. The great fear was that the war would pass the unit by, so little time was lost in launching an ambitious training programme designed to smarten up and progressively train all ranks from the officers downwards. The arrival at Digboi was followed by a grim period of successively gruelling days during which every one got tired and patience and good humour often tended to wear a bit thin. The situation was not made easier by the camp itself, which proved to be a miserable place, lacking many elementary facilities of hygiene and sanitation and puritanically devoid of anything in the way of amenities.

A circular from Battalion Headquarters dated only a few days after the arrival of the Battalion left no one in any doubt that a tough period had started by which the Chindwin and Kabaw Valley might appear a holiday period.

PARADES

1. *Hours of meals* — Breakfast in the Officers' Mess will be served as under:
   0730 — 0830

   NOT as shown on the notice board in the ante-room.
2. This alteration is to enable Company Commanders to be on parade with their companies at 0800 hrs and the Commandant expects Company Commanders to attend punctually at 1st, 2nd and 3rd parades.
3. The Commandant desires an improvement in the men's turn-out and as quickly as possible. Company Commanders will please give this matter their immediate attention. Boot polish is unobtainable at present and in lieu the quartermaster will issue dubbin. Mud and mud stains will be removed from boots and dubbin applied. This should give a clean appearance to the boots.

Signed. R. H. CRONIN,
Adjutant.

When read in its context of the general training time-table of parades, which started at 0630 hours with physical training, this instruction made it virtually impossible for officers to have breakfast and also be suitably attired. Those who thought it meant otherwise than as it read were soon disillusioned. Throughout the day parades of all descriptions went on until so late that the troops had to wash after dusk, much to the dismay of the Medical Officer, who had regard to the prevalence of mosquitoes at the time. The normal day for the officers and Viceroy's commissioned officers ended not before 2000 hours when, after assembling for lectures and 'Tactical Exercises Without Troops', they heard the last 'Directing Staff' solution of the current sand-table problem given.

The upper Assam area from Tinsukia to Ledo had about it an international atmosphere. It was the one area in the Burma theatre in which Allied formations operated side by side. American engineers were busy cutting the famous Stilwell Road through the Patkoi Hills assisted by several companies of Indian Pioneers — these were classified as non-combatants and were found in many instances from local tea estates and organized by personnel of the Indian Tea Association. The construction of the road was a laboriously slow process and, in spite of the high priority demand for its completion, work proceeded only spasmodically throughout 1943. By 15 December of that year, the route had been surveyed up to 99 miles from Ledo, bulldozers were working at the 79th mile and 48 miles of metalling had been completed.

Two Chinese infantry divisions — 22nd Division under Major-General Liao Yao-hsiang and 38th Division under Major-General Sun Li-jen formed the bulk of the Northern Combat Area Command (NCAC), under overall direction and command of General Joseph Stilwell. An American infantry brigade and a cavalry regiment completed the operational side of the Northern Combat Area Command. Thousands of administrative personnel were camped along the main lines of communication, and a large hospital base was located at Ledo.

Socially and officially the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment soon became associated with these Allied formations in a spirit of friendliness and co-operation. The great Allied victory in Tunisia and the expulsion of the German forces from North Africa was celebrated with a massed parade of all major units at Digboi on 23 May, who marched past a saluting base on which stood high-ranking representatives of the British, Indian, American and Chinese Armies. A full array of the Battalion had been mustered to compete with the impressive turnout expected from the Northern Combat Area Command formations. Carriers and mounted Signal and Mortar Platoons were interspaced between the marching rifle companies, but, whereas other units paraded with an air of festivity, the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment moved grimly past in complete Field Service Marching Order and carried, in addition, ten days rations on the man. This was but a minor incident in the story of the Battalion in training and to achieve it complicated arrangements and adjustments had had to be made. The unit was still only partially equipped and clothed and this part of the instruction for the Tunis Day parade on 23 May illustrates the sorrowful pitch to which the Battalion had fallen:

Subject :— DRESS — CEREMONIAL PARADE 23 MAY 1943

HEADWEAR

A Company will borrow from B Company sufficient grey side caps to equip their parade.
B Company will borrow from A Company sufficient steel helmets.
C Company will borrow side caps from D Company.
D Company will borrow steel helmets from C Company.
Headquarters Company will lend to D Company any further number of which D Company may be deficient.

LOAN OF PERSONNEL

Headquarters Company will loan 50 men to D Company.

Headquarters will man —

1 3" Mortar truck
1 Signal truck
2 Anti-Aircraft trucks
1 A/G truck
1 3" Mortar Mule Detachment
1 Signal Mule Detachment

On top of all this interchanging of clothing and personnel Company Commanders were enjoined to make the necessary adjustments at once in order to facilitate renovation of the equipment.

As the Battalion was now a Line of Communication Unit it was not entitled to any advanced priority on stores and equipment to make good the serious deficiencies prevalent at the time. It was not until 23 August that all ranks were issued with Gorkha hats to replace the motley assortment of headgear which hitherto had graced company parades. Other and perhaps more vital items of clothing were still conspicuous by their absence. In spite of consistent representations from the Commanding Officer to higher authority, the process of refitting and training was seriously hampered by the failure of supplies. The lack of at least one good outfit of clothes per man had its effect on their turnout and pride in their appearance. Vital and essential items were in fact never received until the unit moved once more into action. 'Tommy' guns were issued direct from their Ordnance packing cases, cleaned and made serviceable by the companies as they moved up to the Kohima area in February of the following year. Battalion exercises often became a farce as a result of these deficiencies. Newly joined men were unable to comprehend that the sticks and pieces of wood they carried were meant to represent weapons which many of them had never seen. Sometimes the exercises in themselves went beyond the standard of training reached

and as a result, the men, physically and mentally fatigued, derived little benefit from much that they did.

Personal cleanliness, barrack-room duties, anti-malaria measures together with that most ambiguous of military terms—Interior Economy—were only allowed to claim such little spare time as remained after the rigorous training programme of the day had been completed. An acute shortage of soap was largely responsible for many outbreaks of scabies, ringworm and other fungus infections. At one time, the cases of ringworm became so numerous that a special camp was set up, known as Ringworm Camp, and continued in existence for nearly two months before the spread of the infection was arrested.

One feature of the progressive training which could be gauged physically, was night marching. Initial marches of 12 miles by each company were gradually extended to reach the target of 32 miles during the night. The week's rest and 'make and mend' day, which always had to follow, was thus eaten into. These rest days were staggered by companies through the week and provided the only occasion for organized games and some of the lighter side of military life during a year which was so singularly devoid of such amenities.

Although some men proceeded on leave their number was relatively small and limited for the first six months after the arrival of the Battalion at Digboi. It must always remain to the credit of all ranks that the vexations of their daily routine and living conditions never impaired for long their habitual cheerfulness and high morale.

On 5 September the first one hundred reinforcements arrived from the newly formed Training Battalion and were rapidly absorbed into the rifle companies. Many of the sick personnel, absent since the Chindwin days, had rejoined the unit, and with their return, it was possible to send more men on leave. However, another two hundred men were still required to bring the Battalion up to its full war establishment strength, and the receipt of such reinforcements during 1943 was highly problematical. There was

not the same difficulty in the officer establishment. In May there were twelve, but by the end of the year this figure had risen to nineteen. Full advantage was therefore taken of all course vacancies offered. In addition, some officers were sent to Imphal to carry out operational training with active formations in forward areas. A new Second-in-Command, Major R. H. Lowe, formerly of 9th Jat Regiment, arrived to take over from Major Thurgood, who had acted in the appointment since Major Collinson had left on posting to the 2nd Battalion. Captain Williamson returned after completion of his staff attachment with Headquarters 116th Indian Infantry Brigade. Captain J. M. Young also rejoined from attachment and took over as Adjutant.

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On the wider operational front, the Digboi period coincided with a relatively quiet building-up stage of the Eastern Army, which was later reorganized when a Supreme Allied Commander for South-East Asia was appointed on 16 November. 11th Army Group was created, and General Sir George Giffard, G.C.B., D.S.O., A.D.C. was appointed Commander-in-Chief. Eastern Army was superseded by two new commands — Fourteenth Army and Eastern Command. The former, consisting of IV Corps at Imphal and XV Corps in the Arakan, was placed under command of Lieutenant-General W. J. Slim. The latter, containing some of the most important base depots for South-East Asia Command, remained under the overall command of General C. J. E. Auchinleck.

Along the eastern frontier, the defence of Indian territory was prepared behind a screen of offensive patrols, whose scope was gradually increased to include small-scale offensive operations which would allow the build-up of the Eastern Army for its forthcoming offensive to proceed uninterrupted. Deep behind the Chindwin line, still marking the most western limit of the Japanese advance, operated the long range penetration columns of the 'Chindit' Brigade.

In their advance through Burma, the Japanese had halted

short of Fort Hertz, a small outpost in the extreme northern apex of Upper Burma. Here several groups of exhausted refugees from other parts of the country had temporarily established themselves under the protection of a force of Kachin Levies, hastily raised to meet the situation. There was every possibility that the Japanese would resume their advance from Myitkyina. Fort Hertz, therefore, could not be considered as a safe base for future operations. It lay isolated from India and could only be reached from the west by one or two unfrequented and little known tracks running through the Hkamti and Kachin Hills. In fact, the garrison had been brought in and was subsequently supplied by air.

In March Lieutenant Lloyd Jones was detailed to accompany an expedition formed to reconnoitre a route over the mountain ridge through the Chaukan Pass. This old elephant trail sprang into prominence in 1942 when it was traversed by parties of refugees under the guidance of the well-known sporting personality in Assam, Mr. Gyles Mackrell, D.F.C., G.M. It had been decided that this route should be further explored in the altered conditions of the monsoon months, and supply points established along its length to facilitate a possible evacuation of Fort Hertz. The services of Mr. Mackrell were again obtained for this work.

The expedition established a base camp on the Dihing river on 1 April and moved off with a large column of mules, elephants and porters, protected by a contingent of Assam Rifles, through savage uninhabited country of sodden evergreen jungles infested with leeches. Heavy rains slowed up progress and the crossing of swollen rivers and streams presented great difficulties to the pack animals. Chinese troops in the area proved un-cooperative and even hostile as the party moved forward. Many wild animals were reported to be roaming in the jungle wounded and in a dangerous condition as a result of irresponsible hunting on the part of these troops. This, together with map inaccuracies and normal topographical difficulties, added greatly to the work of the column.

At the crucial stage of the build-up, when the expedition was still on the fringe of the Mishmi Hills, information was received that a Chinese company had been attacked by Japanese troops and had inflicted casualties in a sharp engagement. As exasperating as this news was at the time, the end was all the more infuriating when it became known that the 'enemy' was in fact an elephant column on its way to join the expedition. It had been shot up by the Chinese and had stampeded beyond hope of any immediate recovery.

The reconnaisance had to be abandoned for the time being, but the expedition was reformed later and successfully completed its task in the following September. The garrison at Fort Hertz was reinforced when the 4th Burma Rifles was flown in to stiffen the Kachin Levies. Before the end of the year, operations were undertaken in conjunction with Northern Combat Area Command forces which were converging on Myitkyina across the Hukawng Valley.

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During the period October 1943—February 1944 training and Battalion exercises were progressively intensified and many days were spent in the jungles between the camp area and the Dihing river. Jungle warfare strategy had evolved the 'battalion harbour' and 'defensive box' systems. The training area at hand proved highly suitable for practising these new methods. Some of these exercises provided different forms of excitement, when jubilant soldiers might return with a python or even a deer to provide them with a change of diet. One scheme, an exercise involving attacks and rapid forward movements on foot, resulted in several cases of severe heat exhaustion from which one sepoy subsequently died after being rushed to hospital. Strong criticism was evoked from the local medical authorities of the Battalion's training methods. For this particular exercise, all troops had worn steel helmets and heavy equipment and the climax of the operation had been reached during the extreme heat and humidity of mid-day.

A record of the Digboi interlude would be incomplete if no mention were made of the regrettable hair-cutting episode. When Gorkha hats became a general issue to all ranks, it was decided that the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment would conform immediately with the existing practice in other units of the Regiment namely that all Other Ranks would close shave their heads. During the Chindwin days, this order had not been enforced and it was very unfortunate that its revival, which was bound to be unpopular, was not introduced with more tact. The result was that there was widespread disobedience. Many anxious days followed before reason prevailed and authority was reasserted. The main cause for grievance against the order appeared to be the troop's dislike of the aping of a Gorkha Brigade tradition resulting in the men of the Assam Regiment continually being mistaken for Gorkha troops. Subedar Major Jatiya Mikir, who had taken over from Subedar Major Open Chandra Mech on his posting to the 2nd Battalion, and all the Viceroy's commissioned officers, although exempted from the order, set a splendid example and voluntarily shaved their heads. Once discipline had been restored, the order was rescinded on a regimental basis. The men of the Assam Regiment were, thereafter, permitted to wear a normal army hair style. But the impact of these events in the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment caused some damage to harmonious relationship between officers and men which only time and the succeeding adventures of the Battalion would wipe away completely.

On 12 December great excitement pervaded the Digboi area, when the air raid sirens sounded for the first time and enemy aircraft were reported to be approaching the oilfields. Two aeroplanes did, in fact, pass over the town but no bombs were dropped. A parachute was reported to have come down in the Pengari area and Captain Sidhiman Rai with a platoon of C Company was despatched to investigate. After a thorough search nothing could be found and the search was abandoned.

During the month, information was received that

Lieutenant-Colonel Brown had been awarded the Order of the British Empire for gallant and distinguished service on the Eastern Front of India. At a full parade of the battalion, the Commanding Officer told his men that he regarded the award as a Battalion decoration, and that the honour conferred on him should be regarded as official recognition of the good work done by everybody on the Chindwin and in the Kabaw Valley.

The New Year opened quietly. The build-up and training of the Battalion continued uninterrupted, until routine was rudely shattered during the night of 15 February when officers were awakened in their quarters to receive the following message:

> 'There will be a conference for all British Officers in the Mess at 0700 hrs today 16 February.'

The Digboi period was over and all the efforts expended there were about to be put to test. No one knew how severe the test would be, but it was the time for which all had waited.

CHAPTER IV

PREPARATION FOR THE INVASION OF INDIA

28 January 1944

DURING the first two months of the new year there were many indications that Japanese intention and troop dispositions had undergone radical changes on the IV Corps front. A complete review of the situation became necessary to determine the extent of counter measures needed to meet any aggressive operations on the part of the Japanese. Let us turn therefore to make a more detailed study of the situation in order fully to appreciate the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment's part in operations now about to take place.

IV Corps consisted at that time of two infantry divisions (20th and 23rd), 17th Light Indian Division and two regiments of 254th Indian Tank Brigade, in addition to 50th Parachute Brigade and one Medium Regiment of Royal Artillery. The majority of other corps troops were either anti-aircraft units or non-combatant detachments. In addition to army forces, IV Corps was supported by 221st Group of the Royal Air Force, consisting of five squadrons.

The Japanese force ranged along the eastern bank of the Chindwin was known to consist of 15th, 31st and 33rd Japanese Divisions. The latter, however, was thought to be probably short of at least one or possibly two battalions. It may be noted here that the Japanese regiment — the equivalent of our brigade — also consisted of three battalions. The overall strength of a Japanese division corresponded roughly to that of a standard Indian division, but its fire-power was rather in excess of its Indian counterpart. However, at this time, it was doubtful if there was a single up-to-strength Japanese division in Burma.

Intelligence had been unable to discover to what extent

these divisions were supported by artillery and tanks, but it was generally considered that the Japanese were weak in artillery. Some light tanks had been observed in rear areas and no permanent allocation of air forces was known. It appeared, therefore, that the Japanese would have to rely on support allocated temporarily for specific operations.

The opposing forces on land were thus of comparatively equal strength, but in the sphere of air support the scales were weighed heavily in favour of IV Corps.

This being so, any appearance of Japanese air forces in strength on this front would almost certainly be indicative of impending attack and IV Corps would be required to plan and dispose its forces in order to achieve its object of holding the plain of Imphal and destroying the attacking Japanese divisions. The bare fact that since the beginning of the year, the Japanese had moved two fresh divisions (15th and 31st) on to the IV Corps front, and had seen fit to hold this front with three divisions (15th, 31st and 33rd) in place of the two previously detailed for the purpose (18th and 33rd) indicated a change in policy. If, in addition to this, the Japanese brought up other reinforcements, it was reasonable to deduce that their intentions were offensive rather than defensive. Captured documents had shown 15th Division arriving in January and taking up position in the line between 31st and 33rd Divisions. The documents had further disclosed that the Japanese High Command still considered Imphal to be its primary objective. The whole disposition of the Japanese forces, arranged in depth as they were, implied that an offensive was contemplated on a broad front and that suitable precautions had been taken against a long range penetration in the rear.

Other indications were:

The development of roads for use by motor transport and increased traffic along all routes leading from Pinlebu and Pinbon towards the Chindwin.

The construction of a large number of rafts in the Homalin area and in the area between Tanga and Kindat.

The location of large camps along the main lines of communication, especially towards Homalin.

* * * *

As the operational frontage of IV Corps extended over 200 miles it was inevitable that the Corps should be widely dispersed, which created special difficulties and left many inadequately defended localities.

17th Light Indian Infantry Division operated in the Chin Hills to the south of Imphal and 20th Indian Infantry Division was located in the Kabaw Valley to the east. The intervening country consisted of jungle covered hills and there were no lateral communications between the two forces. Behind them stretched long and vulnerable lines of communications. Forward units constantly presented a difficult maintenance problem and one which was not without considerable risk during the rainy season. The Japanese, on the other hand, were freer in the matter of deciding where to bring pressure to bear and so cause further dispersion. Their lines of communication were generally shorter, but any major offensive by them would have to be along main routes already in existence.

The extended condition of IV Corps in the face of the flexible movement permitted to the enemy presented grave dangers. It was accepted that IV Corps could not, while so dispersed, meet a major offensive, and that it ran a risk of defeat in detail should it fail to concentrate in order to fight a battle.

Several courses were open to the Japanese. They could push a force through the Somra Hill tracts to cut the main road between Kohima and Imphal; under cover of this force they could then mount their main attack southwards from Homalin down the Kabaw Valley and occupy Tamu; 33rd Division would in the meantime, adopt a holding role. Or, secondly, they could move against 17th Light Indian Infantry Division in the Tiddim area. Or, thirdly, they could attack frontally across the Chindwin with both 15th and 31st

Divisions with a view to cutting IV Corp's lines of communications both between Dimapur and Imphal and, more locally, between Palel and Moreh. 20th Indian Infantry Division would then be cut off completely, while 33rd Division engaged 17th Light Indian Division and as much of 20th Indian Infantry Division as possible.

It was considered that, should the object of the Japanese High Command be limited to Imphal, the Japanese attack would be first against 17th Light Indian Infantry Division. Then, when the operation was well under way, the next step would be to move elements of 15th and 31st Japanese Divisions across the Chindwin south to the Kabaw Valley. But, if a Grand Design was contemplated with the object of capturing the bases of Imphal and Dimapur to forestall an offensive on the part of the Allied forces and then to exercise political influence over India, possibly by setting up a puppet government in conquered Indian territory, then all three Japanese divisions were most likely to be used. A start would be made against the lines of communication between Kohima and Imphal and against those between Imphal and Tamu and Tiddim. In addition, a threat from the Kabaw Valley against Shuganu might also develop. This whole operation would, for reasons of time and space, be slow, but this form of attack was thought to present the maximum threat the Japanese could produce.

To meet this threat it became imperative that IV Corps should attain the maximum degree of concentration by reducing the vulnerability of its lines of communications. It was considered that this requirement would be best fulfilled by cancelling the tasks then allotted to 17th and 20th Indian Infantry Divisions and by giving each an offensive-defence role designed to hold their respective areas. 20th Indian Infantry Division was, at the same time, to reconnoitre and prepare lay-back positions on the route to Moreh and Shenam. At the first sign of any definite threat, which was to be interpreted as the crossing of the Chindwin by more than one battalion, 17th Light Indian Infantry Division was to withdraw to the Imphal plain and 20th Indian

Division was to retire to Moreh and fight a delaying action to Shenam. Shenam was to be held to the last.

23rd Indian Infantry Division, during the initial stages of any enemy offensive, was to be held in reserve while giving depth in defence to the Ukhrul area. Deployed at Ukhrul was 50th Indian Parachute Brigade with 1st Battalion Assam Regiment guarding the northern exits of the Somra Hill tracts at Jessami and Kharasom.

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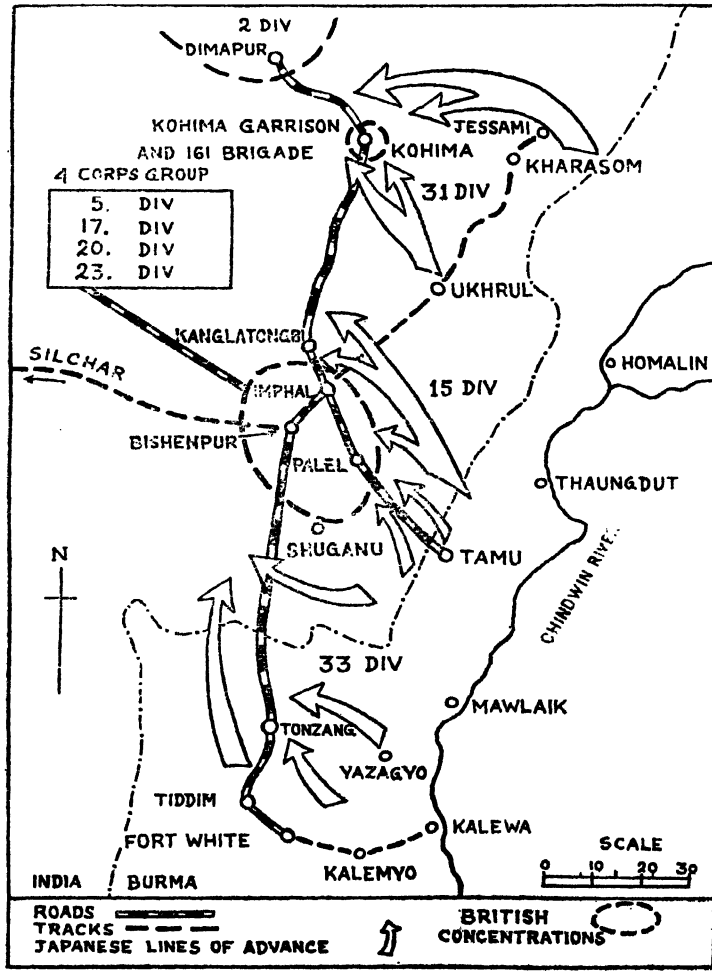
The Japanese attack was launched on 8 March, a week earlier than had been expected. It opened with two thrusts from the south by 33rd Division; one up the west bank of the Manipur River in the Tiddim area, and the other northwards up the Kabaw Valley. By the night of 15 March, 15th and 31st Divisions had crossed the Chindwin in strength at widely separated points north of Tamu.

In making the plans for the offensive against Imphal and Kohima, the Japanese assumed that all their opponent's resources were fully committed along the border front. They did not appreciate that their own advantage in interior land and water lines of communication could be counter-balanced by the use of air supply. The technique, which in more than two years had not failed in Malaya or Burma, was, therefore, to be used again. Outflanking forces were to march through jungle so thick that it could not be permanently defended, and where there was every chance that their advance would not be easily discovered by forward patrols or by reconnaissance aircraft. The Japanese would, of course, be equally hampered by the difficulty of the country in bringing up adequate supplies, but the essence of their plans was that their outflanking troops should capture supply dumps. In particular, they counted heavily on the early capture of both Imphal and Kohima, from which they hoped to obtain sufficient supplies for further operations against India.

The 1st Battalion Assam Regiment is now spotlighted in the operations which follow the Japanese attack: the men

of this Battalion hold for a brief but vital period the centre of the military stage.



Located at Jessami and Kharasom the Battalion lay astride two of the approach routes to Kohima. Difficulties

of terrain, supply and communications were considerable to any unit operating in that particular region, but the Battalion had been positioned there merely as a safe-guard to the north-eastern flank of the Fourteenth Army. It was not expected to become embroiled to any extent with the Japanese forces for the latter were thought not to be in a position to push any sizeable forces through the Somra Hills. However, confounding the Allied military strategists, this is exactly what they did do. As a result, the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment found itself alone out on a limb facing overwhelmingly superior enemy formations and no provision made for its support or reinforcement.

The story of how the Battalion gave battle some sixty miles east of Kohima and overcame insuperable difficulties is told in the chapters that follow. But, it can be said now, that unexpected and strongly entrenched forces at Jessami and Kharasom caused the Japanese to pause and check the momentum of their advance to Kohima. When they sought to destroy the opposition encountered at those two places rather than by-pass them and leave beleaguered pockets in their rear, a great and valuable contribution was made to the future safety of India. In this, the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment may unquestionably claim a large share of the credit.

CHAPTER V

JESSAMI

28 March 1944

AT JESSAMI the men of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment so acquitted themselves as to justify completely the trust given into their hands when the Regiment was raised. The story has its beginning on Tuesday, 22 February 1944 when the Battalion arrived in Kohima after a rapid move from Digboi and there awaited operational orders.

The move from Digboi, begun on 19 February by road and rail, was completed three days later when the unit collected at 57th Reinforcement Camp at Kohima. There preliminary orders were received for an immediate move eastwards deep into the Naga Hills, and the Battalion now took its place in the order of battle being built up to oppose the concentration of Japanese forces along the line of the Chindwin. The Commanding Officer was already out on reconnaissance with the Commander of 49th Indian Infantry Brigade, and the Battalion was therefore temporarily back with its old friends of 23rd Indian Infantry Division. By the time he returned, the Carrier Platoon had been disbanded and the vehicles handed over to the Shere Regiment in Kohima, the Mule Platoon brought up to full strength, and the Battalion mustered in readiness for the next phase.

In preparation to meet the maximum threat that the enemy could produce on the IV Corps front, 50th Indian Parachute Brigade was brought from India to operate in the Ukhrul area in a ground role. The brigade had to leave one of its battalions behind, but it was brought up to strength by the inclusion of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment and set to guard the extreme northern flank of Fourteenth Army.

In deference to the original appreciation of the Japanese

intention, the tasks allotted to 50th Indian Parachute Brigade were: Brigade Headquarters and two battalions were to be positioned in the vicinity of Ukhrul and they were to cover the approaches from the Chindwin towards Imphal and Kohima and: 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was to form firm bases at Jessami and Kharasom and, with one company of 1st Burma Regiment under command at Phakekedzumi, was to guard all exits from the Somra Hill tracts immediately east of Kohima by extensive use of patrols. From Jessami and Kharasom the Battalion was to maintain close liaison with forward screens of 'V' Force and the Assam Rifles.

On the eve of the Battalion's departure from Kohima the officers were entertained at a small party given by the Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Charles Pawsey. Little did any of those assembled there that night think that, when they next saw Kohima, the lovely bungalow and garden would be destroyed and blasted by savage hand to hand fighting. Then there was only the laughter of good fellowship.

In the early hours of the following morning, A Company moved off in transport as advance echelon, while the remainder of the Battalion marched down the Jessami track to descend and climb hill after hill through Angami Naga country. Each summit revealed a view of incredible beauty. Although the march was strenuous, the fitness of the men and the wonderful scenery around them made the war seem very far distant. The third day out brought the column to the Laniye River and, after one final sharp climb, the Jessami ridge was reached. By 28 February, the Battalion had concentrated at Jessami with the exception of A Company, which had moved south to establish itself at Kharasom, and the Mechanical Transport Platoon, which remained behind in Kohima under command of Lieutenant D. S. Elwell.

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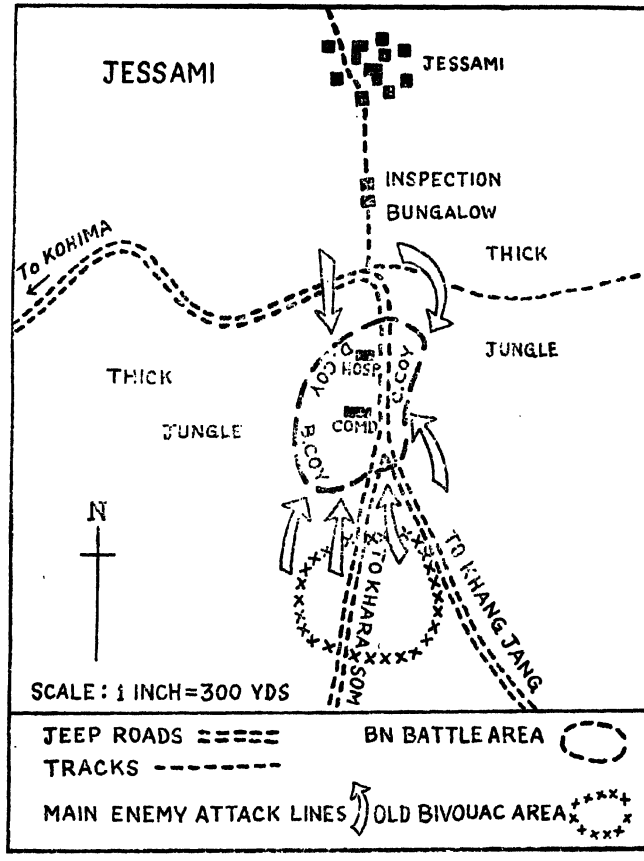
Jessami is an Angami village lying some 60 miles east

of Kohima but situated within the state boundaries of Manipur. A few miles east of the village the jeep track, improved and extended since 1942, came to an abrupt end



at the Thetsiru River, and continued from there as a mere bridle path. Another motorable road branched south from Jessami to meander through scrub and bamboo jungle to Ukhrul by way of Kharasom. The jungle clad ridge with Jessami occupying the northernmost extremity, rises steeply to over 5600 feet within a few miles, and both flanks fall away sharply to the Laniye River on the one side and to

the Thetsiru River on the other. The village itself has little contact with the surrounding villages, for local tradition has it that Jessami is a Black Magic village. As a result, many of the paths in the vicinity by-pass it completely.

The site of the proposed firm base was around the junction of the two jeep tracks and it was this, not any tactically commanding height, which gave the position its importance. As a defensive position it had little to commend it since it lacked the main essential of a permanent water point and could also be overlooked from the high ground to the south. It did, however, have excellent command of all approaches from the east, north and from the west. Patrols based there had ready access to numerous bridle paths leading into the Somra Hills to the east. Looking south-east from Jessami, towards the combined Kuki-Naga village of Khanjang, a magnificent view was to be had, as ridge upon ridge climbed towards the Burmese border area of Mol He and beyond to the 'taungs' of the Upper Chindwin region.

Kharasom, at which A Company formed the second firm base, is a Tangkhul village some 14 miles south of Jessami. It held a corresponding position of importance, for while Jessami was the road-head on the track running east from Kohima, Kharasom lay at the end of a parallel road branching east from near Mao Songsang at milestone 65 on the Dimapur — Imphal road. From Kharasom, the track then ran southwards through difficult country to the Tangkhul centre of Ukhrul, and so on to Imphal itself.

On arrival at Jessami, temporary bivouac quarters were set up south of what later became the main perimeter of the base, and an immediate start was made to construct a defensive network of interconnecting bunkers and foxholes. Reconnaissance patrols were sent out to a wide area forward and to the flanks of the position. One of these patrols under Major Sidhiman Rai penetrated deep into Burmese territory, while another under Lieutenant P. Steyn moved through the little known Controlled Area of the Naga Hills to the north to make the surprising discovery that Japanese patrols had passed along the same paths several months previously.

Japanese character signs had been carved on the wooden pillars of the houses and Japanese trinkets were noticed in the possession of some of the people.

As work proceeded on the bunker positions at Jessami and Kharasom and with supplies of food, ammunition and petrol coming in daily by jeep convoy and being stored away, Subedar-Major Jatyia Mikir was soon in difficulties. Torn between two loyalties — the Regimental Treasure Chest and the ammunition dump — he solved the problem of having no fixed Quarter Guard by making his headquarters, together with the Treasure Chest, alongside his main dump of ammunition, bombs and grenades, but never easy in his mind as to the wisdom of his choice. His troubles were further added to when one day a fire broke out some hundreds of feet below the position to the east and soon swept up to the bunker. The Subedar-Major organized the defence but it was only with great difficulty that the fire was finally put out just before it reached the main oil and petrol store. Battalion stores suffered considerable damage, especially the Signal Platoon, which lost much of its equipment. Although there were no casualties, the Battalion suffered badly in having much natural camouflage around the position burnt off, and the eastern flank now became very bare while the mule lines were completely gutted. The actual cause of the fire was never determined, but there was little doubt that it was a run-away 'Jhum' fire, for the Nagas were then busy preparing their land for the coming rice season.

There was no relaxing of effort during the days that followed, for it had now been established almost with certainty that the Japanese intentions were offensive. Elaborate field works gradually took shape comprising an outer ring of bunkers and foxholes with cleared fields of fire, and an inner line containing the command post, hospital, mortar positions and supply dumps. Surrounding the whole was a criss-cross tangle of barbed wire at a height of about eighteen inches above the ground. Particular attention was paid to the vulnerable southern and northern

sides of the perimeter. When completed the position presented a formidable and imposing obstacle and gave to those who were to occupy it confidence in its ability to withstand assault.

On 8 March, 50th Indian Parachute Brigade arrived in the Kohima area and the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment came under its command. The commander of 23rd Indian Infantry Division, now Major-General O.L. Roberts, C.B.E., D.S.O. and the Brigadier paid visits to Jessami and Kharasom to inspect the defences and discuss the situation.

That day the Japanese began their offensive against India when they moved their 33rd Japanese Division against 17th Light Indian Infantry Division at Tiddim. No Japanese activity had yet been observed on the Homalin and Upper Chindwin front, but there was a threat to Tamu and Imphal from the east and the situation was being closely followed. As a result, a continuous stream of lengthy cipher messages demanding information and yet more information arrived at all hours of the day and night at Battalion Headquarters to plague the Intelligence Officer, Captain J. A. Anscombe.

15th Japanese Division began its crossing of the Chindwin on 15 March and 50th Indian Parachute Brigade immediately left Kohima to take up its position at Ukhrul and Shangshak, but there was still no indication of any threat to this area on the northern flank, and 'V' Force reports continued to be misleadingly negative. However, Lieutenant-Colonel Brown pressed strongly and ceaselessly forward with the fortification of both Jessami and Kharasom, and how wise he was, was to be proved by the events which now rapidly came to a head.

* * * *

Patrols continued to range far and wide about the Battalion area — even the Quartermaster took his turn. With so many parties out, it was expected that ample warning would be received if trouble did come to the Somra Hills.

The Quartermaster took out on 16 March his small patrol,

two sections drawn from C Company, via Khanjang. His task was to reconnoitre tracks, camping sites and water points and the patrol was therefore lightly armed. Two days out from their base, they climbed the last ridge and dropped thankfully down across the frontier to more level country to reach a stockade built by 'V' Force at Mol He. This stockade was on a small hillock and excellently sited to command the water supply and the tracks which met there as they came out of the hills, but it was a position constructed for a garrison of at least 200 troops and was most unsuitable if manned by only a handful of men.

Let Lieutenant Lloyd Jones take up the story here :

'In the stockade when we got there, there were a Burma Regiment Viceroy's Commissioned Officer and a few of his men. Also nearby was a section of Indian signallers. I got a surprise, for Nagas were coming to meet us and passing on towards Khanjang in agitation. The Viceroy's Commissioned Officer told us that these Nagas were full of a story that 300 Japanese had crossed the Chindwin and were advancing this way across the Somra Tracts. I considered it possible that it was a Japanese patrol and at first thought no more than to continue my patrol plan.

A sharp lookout was however kept that night and it soon became clear that agitation was widespread when columns of torches were observed moving along the slopes a few miles from Mol He indicating that scared villagers were evacuating their homes.

I heard that the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills, Burma, was coming through. This confirmed me in my view that I should not go on with my ordered route — easier as that would be — but should stay on and report developments. It was clear that otherwise no news would get back to the Battalion.

The Deputy Commissioner arrived with a large party of women and civilian officials the next day. He was a Shan and kept a firm grip on his bevy of about sixty men and women. He was most grateful for my having stayed on to see him through. He told me that the 'V' Force Headquarters at Kuki had been captured, and I

sent this news back to Jessami, using Naga runners as I could not spare any of my own men.'

It was now clear that the Japanese had begun their well rehearsed infiltration technique of pushing outflanking forces through thick jungle to avoid quick discovery. It was fortunate that one of the Battalion's patrols should have been in the exact area at the time as Army Intelligence seemed to have broken down completely. Had the Quartermaster not been at Mol He it is doubtful if sufficient warning would ever have reached Jessami and Kharasom to prevent a surprise attack. Lieutenant Lloyd Jones also got one message back to 'V' Force Headquarters at Imphal through the Indian Signals Section, but there is no indication that this information was used to any advantage. Small reconnaissance patrols were pushed out while the Quartermaster took up his main ambush position a little distance outside the stockade, which was now visited only by day. Much good work was done on these patrols by the two section commanders, Naik Sentimamba Ao and Naik Tekasashi Ao.

On the third day, an inconclusive brush took place with the Japanese, who became aware of the presence of regular troops in the area. The withdrawal from the stockade proved a wise precaution as the Japanese launched a strong attack on it the next night only to find it empty.

The little band continued to watch and wait — tense and alone — getting very little sleep or time for food and far outnumbered, but puzzling the Japanese and making him cautious and slow in his advance. Each time their position was detected, they quickly moved elsewhere and always outmatched their opponents in jungle craft.

Meanwhile, the Battalion was taking full advantage of the information which was now reaching it from the patrol and it switched from a defensive to an aggressive role.

* * * *

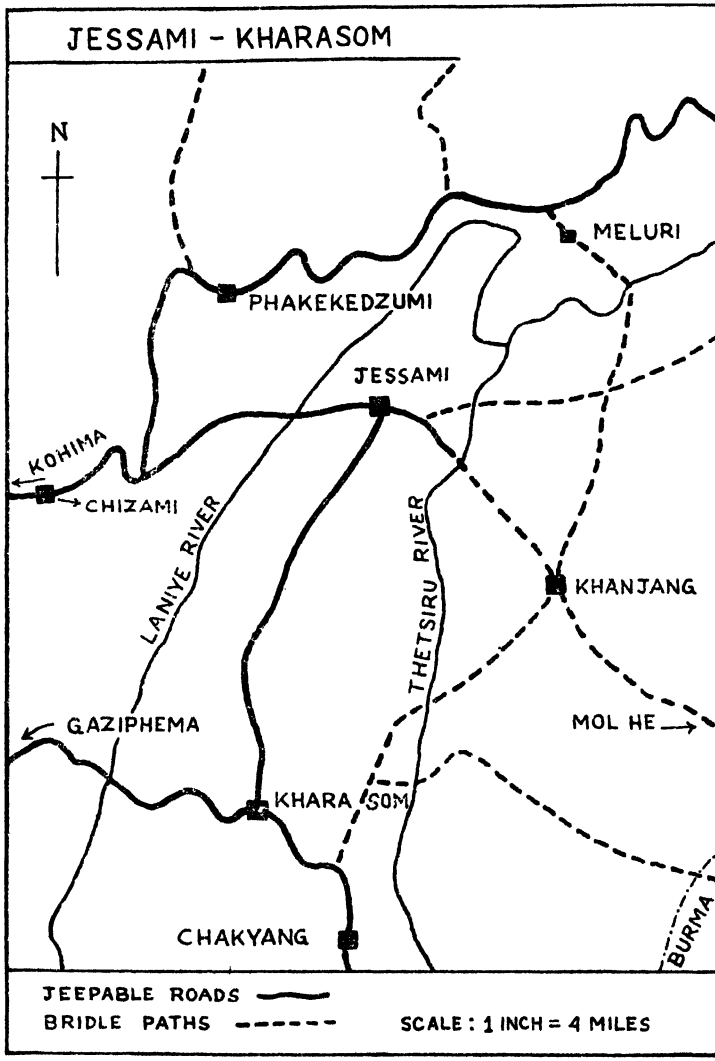
Relief for the Mol He patrol was at hand. Immediately he got information about the Japanese activity, the Com-

manding Officer ordered Major Sidhiman Rai forward with the remainder of C Company to take control of the situation, his orders being to engage and delay the enemy, but to keep his force intact so that it would be available to take part in the main action at Jessami. Lieutenant Steyn with one platoon of D Company was despatched east of Khanjang to guard the rear of C Company, and Major Thurgood with five men established an information centre at Khanjang itself. Other moves involved the alerting of the garrison at Kharasom and reinforcing it with a platoon from D Company under command of Subedar Bawilawra Lushai.

Meanwhile, two patrols were operating north of Jessami under Major Calistan and Lieutenant Corlett. When these patrols arrived at Yisi, they received news of Japanese movement in the area and contacted Jessami using the wireless facilities of an American aircraft observer post there. Major Calistan was ordered to return at once to Jessami, while Lieutenant Corlett with the combined strength of both patrols was to establish a standing patrol at the Rengma village of Meluri, nine miles north-east of Jessami, and to watch the Phakekedzumi — Laruri track so as to prevent a surprise attack on the Phakekedzumi garrison.

Last minute efforts were made to complete the base defences and each post was provided with reserves of ammunition, water and rations. Water presented the main difficulty as it had to be carried from a stream half a mile away and there were not enough containers. The Battalion had to improvise with tarpaulins, mule 'pakhal', kerosene tins and also a large number of bamboo 'chungas'. In this way sufficient water was collected to last about five days, if used with the strictest economy.

The authorities at Kohima decided to rush through one final jeep convoy of food and ammunition, but it was only after the convoy had left that it was discovered that the ammunition consisted of a quarter of a million rounds of .300 aircraft ammunition — not a single round of which was of any use to the Battalion. Precious time had to be wasted in burying it.



East of Khanjang, Major Sidhiman Rai had now linked up with the Mol Hc patrol and the complete company took up a new hill position from which fighting patrols were pushed forward. Reconnaissance parties from the Japanese

camp were encountered and shots were exchanged. One Japanese officer was badly wounded in the skirmish. Then, after an anxious night during which the Japanese encircled the hill position, Major Sidhiman Rai decided to fall back another stage of about three miles towards Khanjang. A standing patrol left behind engaged the Japanese who were following up, and from then onwards C Company felt increasing pressure. The new position in the centre of a narrow ridge provided little cover and proved unsuitable for prolonged defence. While still there, C Company was reinforced by the arrival of Lieutenant Steyn and his platoon. Almost immediately afterwards heavy firing was heard from the direction of Khanjang and it was apparent that the enemy had infiltrated round the company by another route. This was confirmed when a sepoy arrived with the news that Khanjang was under attack. The situation was now serious and demanded immediate action.

To assist Major Thurgood and the 'V' Force personnel at Khanjang, a plan was made whereby C Company would drop down the southern side of the ridge while the platoon of D Company would make its way along the northern flank. Both parties were to meet on the Jessami — Khanjang track a mile to the west of Khanjang. In the event, this reunion did not however materialize. During the withdrawal action, the forward platoon of C Company under Subedar Sarbeswar Rajbongshi became embroiled with the enemy killing five of them, but suffering three casualties themselves. C Company thus became split into two parties as a result and these failed to make contact after they were caught up in a maze of stream beds and game paths. Both parties pushed on independently to Jessami and got there safely and in time to take part in the main battle.

Similar adventures befell the other party on the northern flank. Becoming isolated in a river valley with steep cliff-like sides, the party moved northwards in an effort to extricate itself and adhere to the original plan to join C Company. At one stage they crouched to fight what they took to be the Japanese following noisily behind along the

SUBEDAR-MAJOR (HON. CAPT.) SARBESWAR RAJBONGSHI, M.C. [*Facing page 62*

narrow path, until tension relaxed as a troop of monkeys swung past through the bamboo jungle. It was soon clear that Khanjang would not be reached from the north, so the party made for Meluri and were delighted to find there Lieutenant Corlett and his patrol. Here news was already coming in of increasing Japanese activity in the Laruri area causing the withdrawal of the whole of 'V' Force; during the night sentries brought in Lieutenant-Colonel Stanley of 'V' Force and with him was a large party. As senior officer in the area, he assumed command of all remnants gathered at Meluri and ordered the entire force back to Phakekedzumi.

At Jessami the Battalion spent 25 March moving from the old bivouac quarters to the bunker position. The same day an officer and one platoon of the West Yorkshire Regiment arrived on a liaison visit to discover the situation and report back to Kohima.

Of the next two days the Adjutant, Captain Williamson has written:

> 'Early in the morning the Royal Air Force came over and bombed Khanjang. We could see the planes bombing quite clearly from Jessami, and it appeared fairly concentrated and accurate. During the day 'V' Force were backloading as much rations as possible from jeep-head to Jessami. In the evening, when it was felt too dangerous to try and backload any more, the Commanding Officer ordered Subedar Lohit Chandra Rajbongshi to go out and destroy what remained.
>
> This was carried out successfully. At 1700 hrs Major Sidhiman Rai arrived back with the remainder of his company, having failed to contact Lieutenant Jones and Lieutenant Steyn's party as arranged, owing to a heavy attack on his company. All the men were very tired and hungry and it was decided to keep them as a reserve. Some we used to reinforce and thicken up the defences of B Company, the remainder dug in around the command post. At the same time, Colonel Richards arrived stating that he was now in command of the Kohima Garrison and that the Battalion would

come under his command. He brought with him a new wireless set as ours had been out of order for a week. Colonel Richards repeated our previous orders: "Fight to the last man and last round."

On 27 March, during the "stand-to" at 0600 hours, Captain Young phoned through saying that the Japs were approaching his positions and that he had just opened fire. He said he could see along the track what he estimated to be at least a battalion of the Japanese with mules, elephants and artillery.

That was the last time any of us spoke to poor old Jock, for shortly afterwards the line was cut.

All that day was spent in feverish preparation at Jessami — final distribution of hard rations and ammunition, getting in more water, reinforcing the perimeter and booby-traps, making improvements to the positions and checking on the internal telephone system. We cooked a hot meal which was to be the last for many days, and in some cases, weeks.'

* * * *

With the Japanese known to be both to the south and east of Jessami, the Commanding Officer ordered a full 'stand-to' for the morning of 28 March.

At first all was quiet and normal, but at 0855 hrs Major J. E. Askew informed Battalion Headquarters in great excitement that 24 of the Japanese with an officer at their head were marching down the Kharasom track towards his positions. 'Hold your fire', he was told, and the Battalion waited breathlessly. The Japanese party, on reaching the wire across the road, failed to take cover but halted and bunched around their leader forty yards from two of the Battalion's forward bren-guns. As the machine-guns broke the stillness of the morning, so did the startled Japanese troops crumble on the road and only two of them escaped to crawl wounded into the undergrowth. The others lay in a grotesque heap in the middle of the road. Spirits soared as the news spread through the garrison and there was no doubt who had won the first round at Jessami.

Information was immediately passed back to Kohima by telephone and the authorities there made an urgent request for any items of identification. Naik Jamkisei Kuki of B Company and a 'V' Force scout, Paokhodang volunteered to crawl forward and try to retrieve one of the bodies. Naik Jamkisei was killed in the attempt, but the little scout undismayed went on alone. It was to no avail as Japanese reinforcements had arrived and the ground was too open and exposed. Another attempt to obtain a body also failed when Major Sidhiman Rai with a platoon went out only to be pinned down by withering fire covering all approaches to the bodies.

During the remainder of the day, the Japanese contented themselves by trying to provoke the garrison into revealing machine-gun and mortar positions, but his efforts went unrewarded.

As darkness fell, the encircling Japanese became more active and demonstrated then, and again for many days to come, that he preferred to attack at night when the full effect of his weird cries and cracker bombs could be exploited. That night, as the siege began, the Battalion heard for the first time the famous battle cry of the Japanese. As the attackers hurled themselves forward, a great shout — BANZAI!— went out from their ranks and could be heard even above the noise of the chattering machine-guns and the explosion of grenades. But the attacks were broken up time and again and the cries of victory gave place to the whimpering of the wounded and the dying as they lay sprawled across the wire surrounding the bunkers. No one has ever disputed the courage of the Japanese soldier, but his tactics in the attack against stubborn resistance are quite inexplicable. Time after time he would attack and strain the defence to breaking point, when the operation would suddenly be terminated. The impression given was that rugged defence baffled and upset his preconceived plan of campaign and the appreciation of a sudden and new situation seemed to be beyond the ability of his junior commanders.

On that first night, all attempts to infiltrate into the position in strength were frustrated and, when two or three of the Japanese did manage to worm their way through the outer defence ring, they were promptly killed by the reserve posts. In the early dawn, quiet reigned again and it was seen that the ground along the southern sector was littered with dead. Many of the casualties had undoubtedly been removed during the hours of darkness, for the Japanese does not like to leave his dead behind and will often suffer unnecessary casualties in mock attacks to provide a screen for recovering the original bodies. The garrison had not during the night suffered a single casualty and consequently, morale was very high.

In the hospital the Medical Officer, 2nd-Lieutenant Abdul Wahid made ready to receive the wounded who inevitably would be sent to him for attention. Quiet efficiency pervaded the underground hospital and adequate supplies were at hand to cope with the task ahead.

The bodies found inside the perimeter that morning yielded documents, equipment and a Japanese unit flag. Volunteers were called on to carry the identifications to Kohima. Again, as always when an unpleasant job had to be done, volunteers were to be found in number. Later Lance-Naik Jogendra Nath and a comrade slipped silently down the western escarpment to the Kohima track, and made off into the hills to deliver the documents successfully to the garrison authorities.

The Adjutant describes the second day of the fighting for us:

> 'Apart from another heavy attack in the morning, we had a comparatively quiet day. We took full advantage of this to brew hot tea. We assumed, and quite rightly, that the Jap was licking his wounds and bringing up reinforcements, for towards evening he opened up with his beastly little battalion gun (nicknamed the 'Whizz-bang') but did little damage on this occasion.
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> During the night the Japs would lie in some dead

ground and call on the officers and men — both in English and Hindustani — to surrender and to come over and join them as Assam and India were about to fall into their hands. This had no effect on anyone, even when the Japs used our names, which they presumably had got from documents previously captured.

Often before an attack we could hear the Japanese working themselves into a frenzy while executing one of their war dances; it served the very useful purpose of warning us of their impending attack. We could also smell their cooking and cigarette smoke, and latterly we could most certainly smell their dead.'

The following day the Japanese appeared to have been reinforced and skirmishes took place throughout the morning. The Japanese gun and mortar fire was particularly heavy and destructive and made the position thoroughly uncomfortable. The garrison hit back with its own mortars but, in spite of a brave performance all the detachments were knocked out of action thus depriving the Battalion of its only form of artillery. The mortars were sited in low pits, open and closely grouped together and were easily located by the enemy occupying the high ground to the south. Accurate counter battery fire did the rest, but not before the mortars had helped successfully to break up several attacks.

During the morning Lieutenant-General Geoffrey Scoones the IV Corps commander, spoke to the Commanding Officer over the telephone. He was told that, while the situation was at the moment under control, the Battalion could not be expected to hold out much longer. 'Keep on hitting them and we will see what help we can give you from this end' was the General's reply. That was to be the last message received by the Battalion for many days, since the line went dead almost immediately and the wireless set had broken down the previous day.

To counter the very serious situation caused by fatigue, changes were made in the command of certain sectors. Major Askew was relieved on the road-junction sector by

Captain Williamson and Major Sidhiman Rai took over from Lieutenant R. B. Simpson on the eastern sector. Major Calistan meanwhile continued to command the western sector.

That night, all hell was let loose as the Japanese made repeated bayonet charges and showered the defenders with grenades. As the fanatical Japanese flung themselves forward in unco-ordinated attacks, so did the defenders grimly cling to their positions and repel every charge, but the loss of the 3-inch mortars was keenly felt. Had they been available, many of the assaults might have been broken up with less desperate fighting. Again, however, infiltrators were dealt with by the second ring of bunkers and the perimeter held firm.

But when night had passed, although there had been relatively few casualties, the men were showing signs of great strain and fatigue. All knew that, if relief failed to arrive, it was only a question of time before the defence was breached and the position over-run. Many were the acts of bravery, but courage alone was not enough to prevail against the overwhelming odds which faced the Battalion.

Young and inexperienced sepoys were fighting like veterans: red-hot machine-gun barrels would be ripped off regardless of burns suffered in the process; Japanese grenades and cracker-bombs were picked up and thrown clear of the trenches with all the calmness in the world and there did not seem to be a man in the garrison afraid to carry out any task given to him.

One outstanding act of gallantry was when the Jemadar Adjutant, Jemadar Tonghen Kuki, tried to re-establish communication with the road-junction bunker, which was isolated from the main perimeter by the roads on either side of it. Jemadar Tonghen began digging a shallow trench across the Kharasom track towards the bunker and soon came under heavy fire forcing him to give up the work. Undeterred, he decided to take a chance and dash across to the bunker position. Sepoy Thangtinjam, however, volunteered for this task which he successfully completed,

JEMADAR TONGHEN KUKI, M.C

covered by the effective fire of Jemadar Tonghen. Later, when Jemadar Tonghen attempted to take some much needed relief to Havildar Seikham and his comrades in the bunker, a shell exploded a few feet from him — the blast blinded him and he fell bleeding from many shrapnel wounds. Fortunately, he was pulled into one of the nearby bunkers and his sight was later restored, but his hearing was permanently damaged. His courage was an inspiration to all, as he remained in command of his post and refused to be evacuated from the forward trenches.

Of another is written:

> 'Wellington Massar, a sepoy was always known as the bad boy of the Battalion and a perfect nuisance to his company commander. However once we were in action he was superb; there is no doubt that he thoroughly enjoyed mowing down Japs at the end of his bren gun, which he manned throughout the siege.'

This same Wellington Massar was later to become one of the heroes of the siege of Kohima and to pay the supreme sacrifice while serving his Battalion and his comrades.

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At Phakekedzumi the scratch garrison occupied a strong defensive position on a hill above the village, formerly the site of an American observation post. Jessami was clearly visible nine miles to the east, and by night the sound of battle could be heard and the flash of rifle and gun fire lit up the surrounding jungle.

From the garrison, patrols went out towards Jessami and found it to be solidly invested. On 30 March, one patrol met and brought in Captain Ruther and Naik Gurbajit Angami, both of whom had been at Khanjang when the Japanese had attacked the village. They told the story of how Khanjang had suddenly been attacked from the south and of how after a desperate battle they had escaped with Major Thurgood. Later, Major Thurgood had collapsed and had

been unable to go on. They had been obliged to leave him behind in a small hut amongst Naga cultivations near the Thetsiru River. It was later learnt that he fell into Japanese hands as he was seen again with his captors in the vicinity of Kohima some days afterwards.

Information now arrived from Kohima of the intention to withdraw all forces to the east of the township. Both Jessami and Kharasom were reported to have been informed of these plans by messages dropped from aircraft. The plan was to be put into effect on the following night.

Assam Regiment officers at Phakekedzumi had little confidence that aircraft had been able to pin-point the Jessami position. Indeed a light plane had been observed flying over the area, but appeared to be over the old bivouac quarters, now occupied by the Japanese, and not over the well camouflaged bunker position. Lieutenant Corlett therefore persuaded the officer in charge to allow him to try and get through to the beleaguered battalion, though he knew fully well from the patrols he had led in the last few days what dangers this involved.

As the Phakekedzumi garrison left their positions on the evening of 31 March to march to Chizami, the first ranging shots from Japanese artillery fell just short of the perimeter. Shortly afterwards, Lieutenant John Corlett accompanied only by his orderly, both of them lightly dressed and armed, slipped through the darkness to carry the precious message.

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The Japanese continued their pressure against Jessami throughout 31 March. The Air Force tried to drop essential supplies but failed to locate the box position and the enemy alone reaped the benefit of their efforts. Later during the morning a light plane flew low and very carefully overhead drawing to itself much small arms fire from the Japanese. A message was seen to drop but it fell outside C Company's eastern sector. A fierce battle then took place for possession

of it, but it finally fell to the Japanese. The Battalion, therefore, remained in ignorance of the orders to withdraw to Kohima and each hour's delay reduced its chances of successfully breaking off the action and greatly increased the likelihood of an actual last man last round struggle.

About the night which followed an officer has written:

> 'At about 2200 hours there was a lot of shooting and shouting outside the perimeter on B Company's southern sector and at once all posts were alerted as we naturally expected another attack. One or two of our men did actually open fire, but very soon we heard John Corlett shouting like mad at us to stop firing and that it was him! John was a character well known to all the men of the battalion and, as he had a characteristic speech, he was quickly recognized and welcomed with open arms.
>
> Not content with having reached our own defensive position he very gallantly pressed on to Battalion Headquarters. I say 'gallantly' because the orders were that any movement or noise inside or outside the defences at night was to be taken as enemy and any one seen, shot out of hand. However he got through to the Commanding Officer and delivered his message which instructed us to withdraw at 0300 hours on 1 April to Kohima.
>
> Due to the lateness of the hour, together with the fact that communication by telephone had been increasingly difficult and the disadvantages of starting a lot of movement inside the perimeter at night, the orders were not carried out that night.'

At first light, Lieutenant-Colonel Brown called a conference of all officers and issued orders for the withdrawal from Jessami. To simplify the operation, it was decided that the Battalion would form two parties. The western sectors under the Commanding Officer would get out to the west, while the eastern sectors would drop eastwards in the first instance and, having by-passed Jessami village, would then strike westwards towards Kohima, linking up with the Commanding Officer's party if possible.

Isolated as they were at Jessami, the garrison could

not know that in their rear events were taking place which diminished their chances of escape. Lieutenant-General R. P. L. Ranking, the Area Commander, fearing an enemy move against Dimapur, now recalled the force intended to extricate Jessami and Kharasom and the whole plan of disengagement was modified. 161st Brigade composing this force was to remain in the Kohima area only until the morning of 1 April and then was to concentrate around Dimapur. Kohima itself was to be sacrificed if necessary and, while all efforts were to be made up to 1 April to disengage Jessami and Kharasom, the two garrisons were not to be allowed to delay the more important business of guarding the vital rear base.

The last day in Jessami was almost indescribable. The Japanese, forewarned of the Battalion's intentions by the message which had been dropped in clear and not code, made repeated and determined efforts to break the perimeter. Several times the defences were in fact breached and savage hand to hand fighting took place. Some bunkers changed hands several times, before the gaps were finally closed again. Ammunition was becoming scarce and rifle and machine-gun barrels hot as the grimy little sections strove to concentrate their sleep-starved eyes on the Japanese and beat them off. Not a man remained in a fit state to counter-attack, and it became very doubtful if the garrison could hold out until dark and so permit an orderly withdrawal. For some miraculous reason, the Japanese did not press home their assault, but by 1700 hours, when a large gap was made in the perimeter, it was clear what the result of continuous resistance would be. All the occupants of one bunker position had been put out of action and the entire position was in danger of being overrun. Plans would have to be quickly revised if any from the Jessami garrison were to escape. The horrors of death, seared flesh and broken bone went unattended for no one could be spared from the urgent task on the perimeter to comfort those who had fallen.

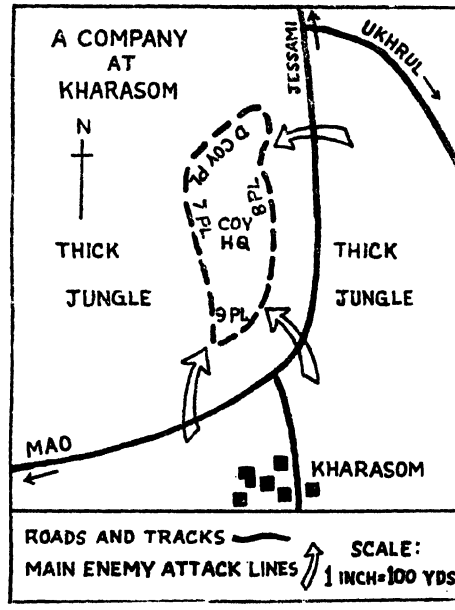
As the situation deteriorated rapidly and the hopelessness of the position became increasingly apparent, the Com-

manding Officer changed the orders governing the withdrawal. No longer was an organized operation possible. Sectors were now told to move off, once it was dark, as and when they could disengage themselves. The only chance of survival now lay in small independent groups and the only assistance that could be given them were words of encouragement with the hope that their training and fine spirit would carry them through.

Documents were destroyed and the men hastily collected what few possessions they wished to take with them, also a little food and water. Great efforts were made to inform all sectors of the change in plans but the existing chaotic state of the internal communication system made this wellnigh impossible. Some positions cut off and fighting hard did not receive the orders until almost too late, while others never found the opportunity to disengage themselves and fought to the last.

As dusk fell and deepened to night, the withdrawal began. A short lull on B Company's flank allowed the western sectors to move off. Other sectors followed quietly whenever they could, but danger lay outside the perimeter as well as inside. All roads and tracks leading from Jessami were heavily guarded and party after party ran into ambush positions. On one occasion, one of these parties was mistaken for Japanese and was fired upon by their own men. In this unfortunate encounter some men were killed. Confusion was rife and the night was made horrible when the Japanese threw caution to the winds and ran howling and screaming through the vacated bunkers and surrounding jungle in search of the troops that had eluded them. Sector parties became more and more split up and progress was slow, especially for those groups which contained the walking wounded. These had been patched up by the Medical Officer as best he could and were being helped along by the more able-bodied. The Medical Officer had done great work for the wounded and the dying throughout the battle and it was sad to hear of his capture within a mile of leaving Jessami. The Command Post was evacuated near midnight,

after all remaining documents were destroyed or burnt. Soon after, the last organized party under Lieutenant Simpson left the perimeter. Jemadar Phukon, the Head Clerk of the Battalion, who had been with the unit only a week, was captured. He was however able to escape some time later during the retreat of the Japanese from Kohima. All that remained of the Battalion office, when it finally re-organized at Dimapur, was one brass seal. During the withdrawal of the last parties, Jemadar Lalhuliana, who had only recently been promoted while the Battalion was enroute to Jessami, was killed.



Jessami was of course but one of the two main battalion positions. Kharasom too had been attacked on 27 March. Before this phase of the Battalion's history is concluded the story of Kharasom, no less historic and heroic than that of Jessami, must be told.

Captain Young commanding A Company took up position

at Kharasom on 25 February with a similar task to that of the main Battalion at Jessami and with the same 'last man last round' orders. Patrols watching the tracks in the Somra Hills took up much of the company's manpower, while those left at the base were busy preparing bunker positions.

After temporarily occupying a small area of flat ground to the north of the village, the company later moved to the real defensive position on an oval-shaped feature a little further to the north. From this position there was a clear view of the surrounding country and a good water supply nearby. To the east the ground was open and sloped gently down to the jeep track from Jessami about 40 yards from the company's perimeter. To the west was a re-entrant with the ground sloping sharply away to the Laniye River. The preparation of the position was completed by 5 March and surrounded by wire entanglements, with particular attention to all likely lines of attack.

On 20 March, the position was alerted and the Battalion was informed that the Japanese had begun to advance through the Somra Hills. All information received from the Mol He patrols was relayed to A Company, and Kharasom was also reinforced by a platoon of D Company. All standing patrols were ordered to close on Kharasom and a sharp look-out was kept from high points around the village. Final work was done on the perimeter defences and food and water stocks were distributed to platoon areas. Several parties of Assam Rifles and 'V' Force arrived in the area from outposts in the Upper Chindwin area and more detailed information was received. These parties were disorganized and some were in bad shape, so Captain Young sent them off to Kohima on 26 March.

At 'stand-to' on the morning of 27 March, the observation post at the track junction on the Ukhrul — Jessami road returned with information that a large column of Japanese was approaching down the Ukhrul track. The Japanese appeared unaware of the company's position and they made their way towards Kharasom village. Fire was held until they were abreast of the defence position and then everybody

opened up on them causing many casualties before they managed to take cover in the undergrowth. Battalion Headquarters was informed of the situation and messages were also passed back to Mao Songsang. Both lines were later cut and the garrison was then without means of communication with the outside world. All that the company had to comfort them was the order to fight to the last man.

After their initial surprise, the Japanese rallied and attacked. The defenders were engaged until midday in fierce fighting. Each assault was held and casualties were inflicted on the attackers. Unfortunately, in the first exchange of fire, Subedar Karindra Rajbongshi was killed by a mortar bomb. As Second-in-Command of the company, his experience and calm bearing had exerted a steadying influence on the men in the anxious time before and during their initiation into battle. The Company Commander too must have felt keenly the loss of his wise counsel. Havildar Zachhinga Lushai was also killed while he attempted to destroy a Japanese wireless post facing the 8th Platoon sector. At dusk, another attack was launched by the Japanese but it too failed to break the perimeter.

During the next three days, A Company was subjected to heavy and almost continuous fighting. The Japanese apparently knew that they were vastly superior in numbers and armament to the opposition, and their assaults were all frontal and almost fanatically disorderly. Each was repulsed and heavy losses were inflicted, but the strain placed on the defenders was very great. At the end of the third day the water reserve had diminished considerably and few men were in a fit state to withstand fresh onslaughts on their perimeter. When they failed to achieve their object, the Japanese vented their spleen on Kharasom village and wantonly burnt it to the ground.

A respite was gained when the usual dawn attack failed to materialize on 31 March. However, later that day, a large column of troops, estimated at battalion strength with mules and elephants, was seen to be approaching Kharasom from the direction of Chakyang. These troops

bivouacked some distance from the company position and their movements could not be observed further. It was certain however, that they would soon join the battle when they found their route to the west blocked.

In spite of his perimeter having remained intact and his casualties so far being few, Captain Young realized that his small force would be unable to hold the position when these new and numerically overwhelming forces attacked. His orders bade him to hold fast at all cost. It must have been with much mental torture that he faced the choice of ordering a withdrawal from an untenable position and so saving some of his men or, alternatively, continuing the unequal struggle which would inevitably result in the speedy and needless destruction of his company, after they had already done all that could be expected of them. During a particularly heavy bombardment by infantry-gun and mortars, he discussed the situation with his platoon commanders and then made his decision that A Company should withdraw from Kharasom. At the same time, he let it be known that it was his firm intention to remain behind himself in strict compliance with his instructions never to surrender the position.

Once it became known that the position was to be evacuated, the men became restive. Although the majority withdrew in good order according to plan, some posts were abandoned before schedule. The company was, therefore, unable to reform in an organized body on the west bank of the Laniye River as had been the original intention. Three separate and widely scattered groups made their way west towards Kohima and arrived there in time to join the garrison for the next stage of the operation.

From the time that the men of A Company gave up their position it is not clear what happened inside the perimeter. Varied reports later received from villagers, who had been hiding in the jungle nearby, must serve to complete the picture. Explosions were heard emanating from the company's position, and it would appear that Captain Young must have attempted to destroy some of his Company's

abandoned equipment. At first light, the next morning, the Japanese launched an attack and finding the position deserted began searching the bunkers. Captain Young, hiding in one of the bunkers, drove them off with hand grenades whereon heavy machine-gun fire was concentrated against his position until he was silenced. So died a very gallant officer, resisting to the end. He leaves no grave which we may honour, but his memory lives on as one who helped to lay so firmly the traditions of the Regiment, and as one who set a perfect example of loyalty to duty and his Regiment.

The tragedy of it all was that the Kharasom garrison had been included in the general order for all forces east of Kohima to close on to a shorter line of defence, but the orders never reached Kharasom because they were out of all communication with other formations. One attempt to make contact ended in disaster. To convey the message and assist in the disengagement action, 23 jeeps plus an escort of 1st Battalion 1st Punjab Regiment were sent down the Kharasom — Mao track. The convoy was ambushed and all the vehicles were captured intact and later used by the Japanese to ferry stores along the main Imphal road.

* * * *

By now it had become clear that the Japanese forces deployed immediately east of Kohima were not merely light marauding parties sent out to disrupt the Fourteenth Army lines of communications, but part of a highly trained major formation bent on destroying all opposition it encountered. Later, intelligence reports proved the presence of the entire 31st Japanese Division (consisting of 138th, 124th and 38th Regiments) on the Kohima front. It was 138th Regiment, forming the right assault formation of the division which attacked at Jessami and Kharasom. In other words, the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment had successfully opposed a force four times as strong as itself and armed with artillery. Heavy casualties had been inflicted on the Japanese

and several of their formations had been badly mauled. Conservative estimates put the total at 250 Japanese killed since contact was first established by the Mol He patrol, and one can only guess at the additional number who were wounded. The Battalion's own casualties at both Jessami and Kharasom were only 12 killed, but others failed to win through during the disengagement operation and the casualty list was in fact much longer. Many fell in ambushes during the withdrawal and no one saw them fall nor have they a known grave. This record must be for them, as for so many others, their memorial.

Japanese accounts of the Jessami battle describe how a force of 800 troops was encountered near the village on 28 March, but claim that this opposition was quickly brushed aside and the advance on Kohima resumed.

What the account fails to explain was why, if this was the case, their forces took another ten days to cover the intervening distance of 60 miles, for they admit that Kohima was not reached until about 8 April when troops from due east of Kohima occupied the Mission just outside the town. The truth was that their advance on Kohima was seriously delayed at Jessami for these ten, and as it later proved, vital days.

The glory that the battalion gained for itself during these first encounters and the recognition it received is reflected in the official XXXIII Corps despatches covering the early days of the Japanese offensive:

> '161st Brigade arrived at Kohima on 29 March. Orders were given to the Jessami and Kharasom garrisons to withdraw on the night 31 March 1 April — the former via milestone 44 Phakekedzumi track, the latter via Gaziphema. A message in clear was dropped on Jessami by air but, unfortunately, not on the garrison. The consequence of this was that, when 1st Assam Regiment withdrawal took place, all roads and tracks leading from Jessami were heavily ambushed by the enemy. The withdrawal of 1st Assam Regiment completed a brilliant operation by a comparatively new battalion in their baptism of fire. Not only had it held the enemy attacks

and inflicted more casualties than it had suffered, but it had successfully delayed the enemy's advance and thus given valuable time for preparation to the Kohima Garrison. The spirit of the battalion was magnificent throughout, and in the end it had extricated itself without any of the help it had been led to expect.'

Later, other, messages of congratulation reached the unit from many sources, and the importance of the battle was finally recognized when JESSAMI was proudly taken as the Regiment's first battle honour.

CHAPTER VI

THE SIEGE AND RELIEF OF KOHIMA

1 April—20 April

AT THE beginning of April, while XXXIII Corps was being built up to meet the serious situation that had developed on the Imphal front, IV Corps had been opposing determined attempts by 15th and 33rd Japanese Divisions to overrun the Imphal plain. The situation on the map looked extremely discouraging. The main road from Dimapur had been cut at Kohima in the north, while the Bishenpur track to Silchar in the south-west, the only other line of communication, had also been cut. IV Corps was in fact completely isolated by land and the Japanese were surrounding the Imphal plain. Leiutenant-General Scoones' plan was first to prevent the Japanese from gaining any footing in the plain itself, and to stabilize the general situation. Secondly, to re-establish a force at Ukhrul and cut the enemy's lines of communication in the east. Thirdly, to use the largest possible offensive force against 15th and 33rd Japanese Divisions.

The strength of the Japanese advancing on Kohima was originally estimated at two battalions, with possibly one more in reserve. It was thought unlikely that they could move a larger force along the Naga Hills' tracks, which were narrow, steep and few in number.

On 29 March, however, it became evident that a whole Japanese division was moving against Kohima.

Such was the general situation before the siege of Kohima. The defence of the area, of which the township formed a part, had been allotted to the Commander of 202nd Line of Communication Area, while Colonel H. U. Richards, C.B.E. had been appointed on 23 March to command the Kohima garrison.

Kohima, the administrative centre of the Naga Hills District, lies 46 miles south of Dimapur on a ridge over 4000 feet above sea-level. The main road to Imphal climbs from the floor of the Assam valley, by a series of tortuous bends and steep gradients, through the foot-hills and then along the edge of the Zubza valley to the saddle of the Kohima ridge. To the west stand the sentinel peaks of Japvo and Phulebudze, often obscured by a curtain of cloud, in a setting of dense jungle and steep slopes. The township area was divided into three distinct sections: all military installations were grouped along the main road; the bazaar and administrative buildings were in the centre of the ridge and the Naga village occupied the high ground on the eastern side between the Phakekedzumi and Bokajan tracks.

Prior to the operations of 1944 Kohima had been a staging post and reinforcement centre for the main forces of Fourteenth Army deployed around Imphal, 88 miles to the south. The permanent garrison consisted only of 3rd (Naga Hills Bn) Assam Rifles, but at this time there were also some detachments of the Shere Regiment (Nepal State Force) and the Burma Regiment in the immediate vicinity. Both the Assam Rifles and Burma Regiment were engaged on protection duty with 'V' Force to the east of the town, and had left behind little more than their headquarter staff in company with administrative sections of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps, Royal Signals and Royal Engineers. 53rd Indian General Hospital was located at milestone 45 on the main road and 1432nd Indian Pioneer Company was engaged on road construction and maintenance about the township. There were, therefore, few combatant troops in Kohima when the news of the Japanese crossing of the Chindwin at Homalin reached the garrison authorities. Until reports of 50th Indian Parachute Brigade in the Ukhrul area being heavily engaged and of the fighting at Jessami and Kharasom filtered through, the Area Commander seemed unwilling to accept the possibility that Kohima was seriously threatened.

Later, when this view was finally abandoned, great diffi-

culty was experienced in the preparation of defensive positions owing to the constant fluctuation of the garrison. Many units were moved without reference to Garrison Headquarters, and the size of the proposed box and the number of troops available were virtually impossible to compute. By 1 April, these fluctuations had fortunately lessened considerably and definite defence positions were established.

Effective steps were taken to concentrate all troops and to evacuate as many of the non-combatant personnel as was possible without disrupting the administrative life of the garrison. The remaining troops were organized into fighting units and allotted their own particular areas to defend. Officer volunteers were called for from Dimapur Transit Camp and many, unable to join their units on the Imphal front, arrived to take command of the hastily formed composite units. 161st Indian Infantry Brigade of 5th Indian Division was flown into Dimapur from the Arakan front, where it had recently been engaged in heavy fighting, and this Brigade moved up to Kohima on 27 March.

At a conference held at Garrison Headquarters on 29 March, it was decided that 161st Indian Infantry Brigade should carry out an operation to disengage the garrisons of Jessami and Kharasom. As we have seen, this operation did not materialize, being cancelled when orders were later received for the Brigade to return immediately for the defence of Dimapur. There the Brigade remained until 4 April when, on arrival of 5th Brigade of 2nd British Division at Dimapur, it once more moved up towards Kohima, only to find the road blocked by the Japanese in strength. Only one battalion succeeded in entering the town to join forces with the garrison there. The 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was in the meantime extricating itself by its own efforts.

On 1 April, the first elements of the Battalion arrived in Kohima under command of Lieutenants Lloyd Jones and Steyn to join the rear echelon commanded by Lieutenant Elwell. They found there also Major Lowe, who was rejoining the Battalion after attending a Court Martial elsewhere.

Lieutenant P. A. L. Brown, who had been away from the unit for several months on extra-regimental employment also joined.

After reporting their arrival, the two officers with the parties from Phakekedzumi gave the Garrison Commander an appreciation of the situation around Jessami. Even at this late stage it was difficult to convince some local authorities that the Japanese might be expected in strength within a few days. Lieutenant Steyn was now assigned to command a mixed force of British and Indian troops occupying a position at milestone 48 on the Imphal road known as Workshop Ridge. As a road-block, the position was lamentable, both the number of troops available and the type of fortifications constructed were inadequate to make the strong point effective. At the insistance of the sector commander, the position was abandoned and the whole defensive layout of Kohima shortened when the troops were withdrawn to the GPT Ridge area to join a composite company of Gorkhas and about 200 Indian troops already holding the position.

Warned now of the great threat to Kohima by strong Japanese forces from the east, the Garrison Commander grew seriously alarmed about the fate of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment at Jessami. He, therefore, ordered Lieutenant Lloyd Jones to Dimapur with the intention that he should fly over Jessami without delay, pinpoint the battalion's position and drop another withdrawal message. On the morning of 3 April, preparations for the flight were cancelled when the stirring news came through that the battalion was already on its way out and that the leading groups had been sighted on the Jessami track heading fast for Kohima. During the previous day motor transport operating east of the town had picked up Lieutenant D. B. Gurung and 56 men of A Company from Kharasom.

* * * *

Defence positions on the main features around Kohima were strengthened daily with the invaluable help of hundreds

of Angami Nagas called out from Kohima village by Mr. Charles Pawsey. His advice and guidance to the military commanders was invaluable and his association with the 1st Battalion as indeed with the Assam Regiment in general, was looked upon with pride and endeared him to all ranks.

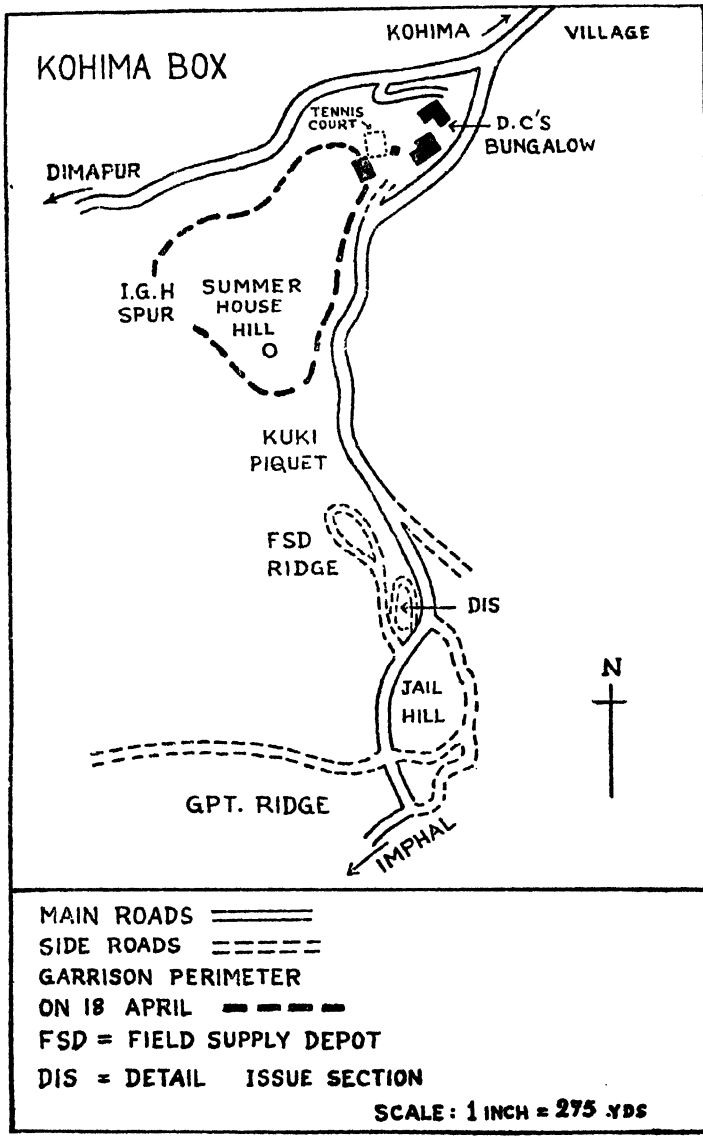
During the afternoon of 3 April, the Garrison was reinforced by the arrival of Lieutenant-Colonel Brown at the head of the main party from Jessami. It was inspiring to see this band of brave and gallant stalwarts come in followed at intervals throughout the day by other parties. Many of the men were in poor shape and needed rest, but each man carried a weapon in his hand and their morale could not have been higher. There was no time for relaxation or greetings, for the situation had become desperate and urgent defence measures had to be enforced. The men from Jessami and Kharasom were soon hard at it, but their lot was made easier by the actions of the Assam Rifles, with whom close friendship had always existed and was now put into expression and cemented as the dirty, tired troops were fed and clothed from the Assam Rifles' Quartermaster stores. Later, as the siege proceeded, this bond of association grew even stronger as men of the two regiments fought and died, side by side.

In spite of the deplorable military situation, a clear plan had not been formulated for the defence of Kohima. Administrative arrangements had been completely disrupted and telephonic communication was chaotic.

Three separate telephone exchanges still operated in the township area and it was difficult to find out which sectors each of them was meant to serve. Command therefore devolved almost entirely on local commanders, for the most part inexperienced junior officers, who were called on to exercise and assume unexpected responsibilities often beyond their rank.

On 4 April, the dispositions of the battalion, totalling then just over 260 all ranks, were as follows:

Major R. H. Lowe (with Lieutenants Brown, Corlett and Elwell and about 80 men from A, D and HQ Companies) .... Jail Hill


KOHIMA BOX
KOHIMA
VILLAGE
TENNIS COURT
D.C'S BUNGALOW
DIMAPUR
I.G.H SPUR
SUMMER HOUSE HILL
KUKI PIQUET
FSD RIDGE
DIS
JAIL HILL
N
GPT. RIDGE
IMPHAL
MAIN ROADS
SIDE ROADS
GARRISON PERIMETER
ON 18 APRIL
FSD = FIELD SUPPLY DEPOT
DIS = DETAIL ISSUE SECTION
SCALE: 1 INCH = 275 YDS

Major A. I. Calistan (with Major Askew and B and C Companies) .... 53 IGH Spur

Lieutenant P. Steyn (1 Platoon of D Company) .... GPT Ridge

Lieutenant-Colonel Brown had joined Garrison Headquarters. Major Sidhiman Rai had been despatched to Dimapur to appraise the Area Commander of the situation which had confronted the Battalion at Jessami, and later, to command Battalion rear headquarters.

During the day of 4 April, Naga scouts reported the advance of a Japanese column of about one battalion from the direction of Jakhama. Garrison Headquarters immediately moved into the battle position prepared for it on Summerhouse Hill. Tension mounted steadily and the question of whether Kohima could survive an attack was on everyone's lips. The answer lay in the realms of conjecture, but hopes and spirits were high. And so the last night of peace began, before the stillness of the hills and the forest was broken by the clatter of machine-gun fire and the roar of exploding mortar bombs.

It was approaching midnight when the Japanese launched their first attack against Aradura Spur, to the south-west of GPT Ridge, and the opening phase of the battle for Kohima began ill for the Garrison. The position was covered by an ambush platoon of the Shere Regiment, which withdrew in some disorder through the GPT Ridge and Jail Hill positions. The unexpected collapse and the confused withdrawal of the Shere Regiment platoon had a gravely adverse effect on some sectors of GPT Ridge. At 'stand-to' the next morning, it was discovered that all the most western sectors had been yielded during the night without even being attacked, and they now lay open and deserted. The situation was now crucial, as there was a distinct danger that the whole position would be over-run. New lines were hastily thrown up to close the gap, and tentage erected within the box was pulled down to clear fields of fire. This was done under fire and casualties were numerous, but the Gorkha company made up from reinforcement personnel behaved manfully and calmly.

On them now rested the full burden of the defence of GPT Ridge and, together with the platoon of D Company, they could be counted on to offer every resistance.

Enemy pressure against GPT Ridge hardened on 5 April, but all the attacks were held with the aid of magnificent mortar fire from the battalion's mortar sections operating from Jail Hill. The mortar fire did much to revive the troop's spirits. However, when this supporting fire was later withdrawn, it became clear that the Japanese were too strong to be held at bay for any length of time. Captain Douglas Frew, who was commanding the position, could not know that, in order to render maximum support, Lieutenant Corlett had sited his mortars in such a position as to be overlooked by the Japanese on Aradura Spur and Workshop Ridge. Undeterred by this, he and Naik Imtisang Ao had gallantly kept the mortars firing until both were wounded by Japanese counter battery fire and their weapons were put out of action. Without this vital support, there was no other alternative but to evacuate GPT Ridge, and permission was sought to withdraw to Jail Hill. It was with bitter feelings that this move was carried out during the afternoon, for the position had failed to hold mainly because of the virtual desertion of certain officers with their make-shift detachments the previous night. Enquiries were instituted after the siege ended, but the matter was never explained satisfactorily and the charges against the officers were dropped.

Following close on the heels of the troops from GPT Ridge, the enemy now launched an attack on Jail Hill supported by infantry-gun and mortar fire. A foothold was gained across the road after severe fighting, during which grievous casualties were inflicted on the defending troops. A counter attack was organized by Lieutenant Brown and Subedar Kapthuama Lushai, but it failed to make any headway. The Japanese were superior in numbers and in fire power, and our troops could not withstand the ferocity of their assault. Lieutenant Brown was mortally wounded and carried to the rear, where he died before he reached

SUBEDAR IMTISANG AO, M.M. [*Facing page 88*

hospital, and the counter attack broke up. With most of Jail Hill now in Japanese hands, it became only a question of time before this position would also have to be yielded. Erroneous information reached Battle Headquarters that only about two platoons of the Japanese had been involved in the attack and, in consequence, a counter-attack was staged by a company of the Royal West Kent Regiment, which had arrived in Kohima a few hours before from Dimapur and taken up position on Summerhouse Hill. This company moving into the attack encountered the Japanese strongly entrenched in the Jail Hill bunkers and the attack failed. The position was finally abandoned to the Japanese when the company withdrew. During the fighting on GPT Ridge and Jail Hill, the Garrison forces had suffered heavy casualties. Three officers were killed and four were wounded; 75 Other Ranks were killed and over 100 were wounded. It was estimated on the other hand that casualties inflicted on the Japanese were in the region of 150 killed and wounded.

All troops of the Garrison were now concentrated on Summerhouse Hill, Kuki Piquet and FSD Ridge. The position was thoroughly confused owing to disrupted communications with Battle Headquarters and the situation began to appear beyond hope. There can be little doubt that, had the battalion of the Royal West Kents not arrived that day, Kohima must surely have fallen before night was through. This fully equipped and fresh force, under command of Lieutenant-Colonel H. Laverty, put new heart into the defenders. These troops took over all the important sectors on the perimeter until some measure of order could be restored and alternative arrangements could be made by the Garrison Commander. Hundreds of non-combatants had to be contained within the box as there were no means of evacuating them to Dimapur. Summerhouse Hill with its supporting features was heavily congested with troops. There were not sufficient prepared positions and bunkers for everyone. Many men from the two evacuated features spent an anxious and weary day digging into the rocky ground to find shelter from enemy shelling. On 53 IGH Spur, three

men of B Company were killed by gun-fire and several more were wounded.

The positions now occupied by the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment were, with the exception of a few well constructed bunkers, little more than slit-trenches with light brush wood or ground sheets for cover from the weather and enemy bombardment. Great improvements were made as time went on, but suitable material for roofing was never easy to obtain. In these trenches the men lived and slept, ate and stored their rations and water. Cooking was impossible beyond the daily tea ration and food consisted mainly of biscuits and the contents of numerous tins. Hygiene was of the most primitive order and, in fact, hardly existed at all. On the Commanding Officer's sector, the foul tent which served as some sort of latrine was in a fully exposed position and only the most intrepid considered it safe to use. As it happened, this tent remained unscathed in all its unsavoury glory to the very end of the siege. It was, however, fortunate that the weather during April in the Naga Hills is mainly fine and favours those forced to live out of doors, and this now proved to be one of the happier aspects of the turbulent days that followed.

* * * *

It was unfortunate that the arrival of the Royal West Kents had an adverse affect on the harmony of the relationship between Garrison Headquarters and units comprising its command. Friction soon arose over the exact distribution of command. As a result, Lieutenant-Colonel Brown obtained permission to leave Battle Headquarters and took up position with another sector. Command of the greater part of the perimeter now came under Lieutenant-Colonel Laverty being the commanding officer of the only complete infantry unit.

Determined attempts made by 161st Indian Infantry Brigade to reinforce the Garrison were continued. One company of the 4th Battalion 7th Rajput Regiment succeeded in getting through before the road was completely blocked by the Japanese. The Brigade Commander, Brigadier

D.F.W. Warren D.S.O., O.B.E., was now faced with the choice of attacking immediately to clear the road without first ascertaining the strength of the Japanese, or, of holding his hand. He decided to wait and 161st Indian Infantry Brigade took up position in the vicinity of the small village of Zubza at milestone 36. From the Zubza box, constant pressure could be maintained against the Japanese surrounding Kohima, while preparations for the relief of the garrison there were worked out.

With the contraction of the garrison perimeter after the loss of GPT Ridge and Jail Hill, administrative and tactical drawbacks at once became apparent. The tactical importance of Summerhouse Hill, supported by FSD Ridge and the small feature known as Kuki Piquet, could not be underestimated. To gain possession of it, the Japanese could be expected to exert all efforts. Should the defence line crack and be penetrated the Garrison would be forced either to surrender or to splinter into small parties in an endeavour to elude the enemy in the surrounding hills and jungles. Water was extremely scarce, since the main supply pipeline had been cut with the capture of GPT Ridge, and it had to be drawn from two very small springs. From the very beginning these were overlooked by the Japanese and water could only be obtained during the hours of darkness and then only by small parties working quietly so as not to reveal their mission. Strict rationing of water at one pint per day per man was immediately enforced and the position never substantially improved. Distribution of water supplies became one of the main problems facing the Garrison Commander and it was but natural that sometimes certain sectors should suffer and fail to get their proper allotment. Food on the other hand was not in short supply since, from the outset, all stores had been removed from the Detailed Issue Section and distributed to the various sectors. But, in spite of adequate stocks of food, hot meals could not be provided for the troops; fires of any description immediately provoked concentrations of Japanese rifle and mortar fire.

No prior arrangements had been made for the care and

comfort of the wounded and the medical situation at first was most unsatisfactory. Several first aid posts had been established, but there was no organization for bringing wounded men to a central place and there were no Advanced Dressing Stations. 53rd Indian General Hospital had had to be abandoned because it lay exposed to direct mortar and machine-gun fire. Personnel of 80th Parachute Field Ambulance had formed an aid post immediately below Summerhouse Hill, but they had neither space nor equipment available to deal with serious cases. To add to the appalling conditions, the old hospital caught fire while it still contained patients and these had to be evacuated hastily by combat personnel up to Summerhouse Hill. A field hospital was only established after the arrival, at his own request, of Lieutenant-Colonel J. Young, M.B.E. commanding officer of 75th Indian Field Ambulance, to reorganize the medical facilities of the garrison. In view of the shortage of medical equipment and the confined area in which the garrison was situated, Lieutenant-Colonel Young decided to form on Summerhouse Hill a composite Advanced Dressing Station staffed by all available medical personnel and to have all casualties evacuated to that area. This hospital when formed had to occupy a most unsuitable site and movement within the area was clearly visible to the Japanese occupying the high ground around the Naga village. There could be little safety for the wounded lying in their miserable and shallow trenches, and surgical work, including major operations, had to be carried out under the most primitive conditions. Water supplies and lack of means to sterilize instruments presented constant difficulties and hampered the doctors at every turn. To spare the hospital the punishment of counter battery fire, the Garrison's mountain guns lay silent. They could only be operated effectively from positions alongside the hospital and it was considered more important to spare the wounded than to inflict problematic damage on the Japanese.

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During the three days following the initial assault on Kohima the Japanese were not very active. Small probing attacks were made on FSD Ridge and DIS while the troops repulsed another attack on the DC Bungalow area. The Garrison took advantage of the lull to sneak through a party of walking wounded, who went out down the Zubza Valley under command of Lieutenant Corlett. One can imagine the tension which must have gripped this small party as it moved through the darkness along Naga cultivation and game paths. Had they been discovered there could be little hope that any would survive the encounter as the Japanese were not to be expected to encumber themselves with wounded prisoners of war. But the party was not detected and reached its destination safely without the loss of a single patient.

As the evening of 8 April drew to a close, no word had yet been received from the Shere Regiment detachments holding Treasury Hill and it was presumed that the position had also fallen to the enemy.

On 9 April, the Japanese launched an attack on the DC Bungalow area. A footing was gained across the road and positions in the immediate vicinity of the bungalow were captured together with the section of mountain guns in position there. Orders to restore the situation led to two platoons, one from the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment and the other from the Burma Regiment, making a counter attack under command of Captain Patrick of the 1st Battalion 7th Gorkha Rifles. Subedar Kapthuama Lushai with his platoon succeeded in reaching the bungalow under covering fire and occupied part of the position, but as the other platoon failed to make any progress, he was unable to retain his position in the face of heavy fire. He withdrew after four of his men had been wounded and the attack was terminated. Meanwhile a company of Royal West Kents had taken over responsibility for the defence of the area and established a new defence line on the other side of the Deputy Commissioner's tennis court and around the Club building. These positions later caught the imagination of the whole

world and became famous as they resisted repeated efforts to breach them.

That night more probing attacks were made on almost all sectors of the perimeter. Nowhere did these develop severely except on the DC Bungalow area. There the Japanese attacked across the tennis court, but were eventually driven back by the West Kent defenders. The sectors occupied by the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment were fairly quiet, but intersector patrols were active and caused many false alarms, since this method of maintaining contact had not yet been perfected.

All was quiet on 10 April after the Air Force had strafed Jail Hill and GPT Ridge with good results and given air support to the Garrison in general. Air dropping of supplies had now started. Often the sky would be a mass of gaily coloured patterns as the parachutes were released overhead. But air supply presented many problems; it was a mixed blessing during the siege and proved only partially successful. The difficult terrain made accurate dropping impossible and a great proportion of the stores floated wide of the dropping zone to fall into the hands of the encircling enemy. Unfortunately, the Japanese had several of our mortars, captured in earlier campaigns, and when our ammunition eventually was returned to us in the evenings, we were at the wrong end.

It was distressing that the burden of these evening 'hates' fell mainly on the overcrowded hospital area. But worse still was to come when, later in the siege, the main operating theatre was struck by several bombs. Two of the gallant medical officers were killed while a third was severely wounded.

After dark on 10 April it was decided to evacuate the DIS position and the troops located there were withdrawn to FSD Ridge. The position's tactical importance was nullified by the fact that it was dominated by Jail Hill and could never be expected to play any great part in the Garrison defence plan. It had been impossible to destroy the huge quantities of dry rations, but the godowns were set on fire

and the Japanese derived little benefit from their capture. Probably the most serious consequence of this move was the ever increasing concentration of troops on the remaining features. Each morning and evening the Japanese laid down harassing fire and could not fail to cause casualties, so closely were the trenches grouped together and so inadequate was their overhead cover. It was in one of these shallow trenches that Lieutenant Elwell was partially blinded during a mortar bombardment on Kuki Piquet. A bomb fell on the edge of his slit trench throwing up a cloud of dust and stones and causing part of the trench to collapse. Fortunately the damage to his eyes was not permanent, but Lieutenant Elwell was in constant pain and could barely see, yet he remained at his post until finally relieved and the siege lifted.

When the next two days were again quiet, the Garrison was led to believe that the Japanese had decided to draw off to meet pressure from 161st Indian Infantry Brigade. And, indeed, Brigadier Warren's force was about to resume its advance and make a strong thrust southwards along the axis of the main road. A new corps, XXXIII Corps, under command of Lieutenant-General Montagu Stopford, comprising two divisions, had by this time concentrated at Dimapur.

As these forces moved forward to the relief of beleaguered Kohima, the Garrison commander, Colonel Richards, issued the following Special Order of the Day dated 13 April 1944.

'1. I wish to acknowledge with pride the magnificent effort which has been made by all officers, NCOs and men and followers of this Garrison in the successful defence of Kohima.

2. By your efforts you have prevented the Japanese from attaining his object. All his attempts to overrun the Garrison have been frustrated by your determination and devotion to duty. Your efforts have been in accordance with the highest traditions of British Arms.

3. It seems clear that the enemy has been forced to draw off to meet the threat of the incoming relief force and this in itself has provided us with a measure of relief. His action now is directed to containing us by harassing

fire, while he seeks to occupy odd posts under cover of that fire.

4. The relief force is on its way and all that is necessary for the Garrison now is to stand firm, hold its fire and beat off any attempt the enemy may make to infiltrate among us.

5. By your acts you have shown what you can do. Stand firm, deny him every inch of the ground.

6. I deplore the sufferings of the wounded; every effort is being made to alleviate them at the first opportunity.

7. Put your trust in God and continue to hit the enemy hard wherever he may show himself. If you do that, his defeat is sure.

8. I congratulate you on your magnificent effort and am confident that it will be sustained.'

13 April was a tedious agony of anxiety and misfortune for the defenders of the Garrison. At dawn, the Japanese gave every indication that they meant to launch a serious attack. They began the day by laying down heavy infantry-gun and mortar fire on all the western sectors. This could only be taken as preparatory fire and the sector commanders were, therefore, much surprised when no attacks on any scale did in fact develop. However, a constant vigil was maintained and the 'stand to' mounted at first light became continuous and was rigidly enforced. The Garrison suffered many casualties that day from the shelling. Soon the hospital was filled to the point of being dangerously over-crowded. Some of the less seriously wounded men were placed in the care of Lieutenant-Colonel Brown's sector adjacent to the hospital.

These were accommodated in addition to many non-combatants who had become homeless when their bunker positions were destroyed by mortar bombs. The men of the Battalion came through the day unharmed, but, towards the end signs of fatigue began to appear and they had to be held firmly by their officers. Kuki Piquet had suffered badly and the mounting strain told severely on the men in occupation there. It was only after nightfall that relief came and calm was once more restored along the perimeter.

More than a week of siege had now passed and the time

had come for changes on the perimeter. On 14 April Major Calistan was ordered to take over the DC Bungalow sector with a composite company of Assam Rifles and Assam Regiment. B Company of the West Kents, who were relieved by this move, took over the hospital spur sector vacated by Major Calistan's troops and were received there by Major Askew. He was to make his way to the DC Bungalow area on completion of his handing-over duties. He never reached his destination but was killed by a sniper's bullet and fell a short distance from Battle Headquarters. The change over was successfully completed, but a further eight casualties occurred as the troops dashed across open ground to occupy the vital forward bunker positions of the sector. Amongst the three who were killed lay Havildar Zathangpuia Lushai. He had already proved himself to be a competent and courageous Platoon Commander and his loss was keenly felt. Later, with the discovery that Major Askew had been killed, Lieutenant Steyn joined Major Calistan on the new sector and took over the left wing of the defence.

Bearing in mind the difficulties and dangers involved in relieving the DC Bungalow area, Major Calistan and his troops offered to remain there as long as possible. In fact, they continued in occupation for the remainder of the siege.

They were finally relieved by D Company of 1st Battalion 1st Punjab Regiment, which fought its way through to the Garrison on 18 April.

* * * *

Respite was again given to the Garrison during the next two days. A message was also received from 161st Indian Infantry Brigade to the effect that contact was expected to be made with the Garrison forces on the morning of 16 April. In the event, this link up did not come about and, as the day drew on and the Garrison waited, nothing was done to aggravate its very precarious position or to provoke retaliatory action. Late in the afternoon, however, tension had reached such a pitch that an out-let for it had to be found and

a grenade raid on the Japanese positions across the tennis court on DC Bungalow was organized. The Japanese had established a machine-gun post amongst some trees to the rear of the Assam Rifles Commandant's former bungalow, and had been harassing the forward positions day after day, restricting all movement by our troops. An attempt to wipe out the post with 2-inch mortar bombs had met only with temporary success and the Japanese were as firmly entrenched as ever. The plan to attack was enthusiastically taken up and preparations for it put in hand.

In the failing light, four men led by Naik Dilhu Angami rushed forward under covering fire, each holding in his hands grenades from which the pins had already been extracted. Sepoy Wellington Massar manned his Bren gun while standing on the billiard table in the Club in order to give him a better field of fire; another Bren joined in to give support from the tennis court bunker on the extreme left of the position. The grenadiers covered a distance of about thirty yards across open ground and the Japanese were completely surprised by the suddenness of the action. Exploding grenades destroyed the machine-gun crew and from the debris of the position the raiders returned with seven rifles and an officer's sword. The Japanese recovered from their initial surpirse as they made the return trip and Sepoy Wellington was badly wounded as he struggled to correct a fault in his gun, which had jammed. He fell from his position, but, in spite of his wounds he managed to free his gun and resume firing. Only after ensuring that Naik Dilhu and his grenadiers were safely back in their own lines did he give up. His wounds were dressed at Sector Headquarters but his injuries were severe. At his own request he remained with his comrades on DC Bungalow and, at the end of the siege, was admitted to the base hospital at Dimapur. Wellington Massar died there of his wounds on 15 May. For the part he played in the gallant raid of 16 April and for his great courage, he was awarded the Indian Distinguished Service Medal and so became the first Other Rank of the Assam Regiment to be decorated for gallantry in the field.

SEPOY WELLINGTON MASSAR, I.D.S.M.

The raid marked the end of all serious attacks on the DC Bungalow area for the remainder of the siege whilst the position was occupied by men of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment. The defenders were not again called on for any activity but that of being prepared. As darkness closed on the battle field that night, the Japanese could be heard repairing their bunker, but they had learnt their lesson and the machine-gun was not replaced.

During the early hours on the morning of 17 April, the Japanese began shelling the FSD feature and then moved into the attack. Troops of the Royal West Kent Regiment battled bravely to beat off all the assaults but suffered many casualties in the fighting. When they had had more than enough, it was decided that they should be relieved. Two platoons of the Assam Rifles, together with one platoon from the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment, were detailed for this task. The take-over operation was not a success and a wave of panic swept over the sector when the relieving forces were subjected to intense mortar bombardment. Several of the forward bunkers were abandoned and were not re-occupied until Lieutenant-Colonel Brown personally led a counter attack with men hastily collected from other sectors of the perimeter. In the meanwhile, the adverse situation was further restored on this front by the Garrison troops. Although such a situation should never have been permitted to arise, it must be remembered that the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment and Assam Rifles had already been almost continually in action for a month. The former had also fought and won through a major battle at Jessami and Kharasom. The troops were desperately tired. The weaker members were beginning to break under the unprecedented strain placed on them by a further two weeks of unmitigated warfare.

The Garrison, which had endured so much, was not, however, overwhelmed. The Japanese held back and did not follow up their advantage. Once more the Garrison breathed and used the uneasy lull that followed to restore the dangerous position created by the loss of FSD Ridge and

Kuki Piquet, by moving additional troops to the affected area and establishing a new defence line.

However, this attack had made it increasingly clear that the defenders had reached a stage when casualties and strain had rendered them unfit to withstand more such actions. Only Summerhouse Hill remained of the original defence area of 5 April — a great mass of dog-tired troops was now collected into an area less than one quarter in size of the original area.

As it turned out, this was the last all-out effort to be launched against the Garrison. But this could not be foretold at the time and many were the anxious questions being asked. 'Sahib, how long do you think we will have to stay here? Do you think we can hold out?', asked one man on DC Bungalow. But how could they be answered — anyhow with what certainty? Officers and the men who asked such questions could only trust blindly that they were not destined to be annihilated. Many felt they were simply in the presence of something too big to grasp. They had lived surrounded by suffering and sudden death, noise, filth and stench and some had become callous as a result, but throughout, the decent feelings of comradeship still survived. A man who had watched without emotion of any kind his friends fall and die would later turn and give his last drop of water to a stranger in need of it. That was the spirit of the men who formed the Garrison of Kohima and it was just that the Garrison should survive.

The Japanese now began to feel increasing pressure from 161st Indian Infantry Brigade in the Zubza area. The failure of their assault on Summerhouse Hill brought home to them the realization that soon they would be facing possible attack on two fronts, unless they moved to the defensive. 2nd British Division, advancing from Dimapur, had linked up with 161st Indian Infantry Brigade. The whole relieving force was lined up to give the Garrison effective artillery and ground support. Satisfactory wireless contact enabled Battle Headquarters to arrange a wide range of defensive fire targets with the artillery batteries outside. It was now

possible to call down gun-fire on any of these targets within a matter of two or three minutes of the request being passed to Battle Headquarters. This, more than anything else, restored the full morale of the Garrison. Until this time, no unit or sector had been able to expect any help beyond what it could supply itself, but now fresh forces were at hand to prove that the Garrison no longer stood alone to bear the burden of the battle.

At 0830 hours on the morning of 18 April, the long awaited 161st Indian Infantry Brigade attack opened with an artillery barrage on Shere Ridge and Piquet Hill.

To the Garrison, it seemed unbelievable that the nightmare of the past weeks could be drawing to a close. Tired eyes watched as fighter-bombers of the Royal Air Force roared overhead to strafe GPT Ridge and the surrounding areas and also to bomb the hill on which stood the Naga village. Weary faces smiled as the news of the attack came through. Now the question whether Kohima could survive the storm had a certain answer.

Troops of the 1st Battalion 1st Punjab Regiment led the attack along the axis of the main road with the support of tanks and established piquets on the road to enable casualties and non-effective personnel to be speedily evacuated from the Garrison when it was finally reached. The attack went according to plan and before midday the Punjab battalion had made contact with the Garrison. All wounded personnel were then evacuated to the main road north-west of the box and stretcher parties, supplied by Line of Communication troops, carried them to milestone 44½ from whence they were finally despatched to base hospitals. With the arrival of the Punjabis, it became possible to relieve some of the perimeter positions and allow the new-comers to assume responsibility for the defence of Summerhouse Hill. D Company of the Punjab Regiment took over the DC Bungalow area from Major Calistan's force there. 1st Battalion Assam Regiment now closed all its detachments from other sectors on the Commanding Officer's sector near Battle Headquarters.

When dawn broke on 20 April, the arrival of the Royal Berkshire Regiment brought with it the final relief of Kohima. This battalion occupied 53rd IGH Spur and through these troops moved men of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment. Enemy shelling was still taking place and it was a tactical operation, but the tired, dirty jawans found time to hail the relieving troops and knew with pride that they were being looked on as heroes. The Commanding Officer of the Royal Berkshires describes what he found on his arrival:

> 'We were most profoundly shocked by the conditions which prevailed on Garrison Hill. The troops looked hollow-eyed, dirty and wore beards. The stench of festering corpses—Japanese, British and Indian—was overpowering. There were no sanitary arrangements and stores of all descriptions were lying about. It was possible to pick up anything from a Tommy-gun to a pair of ladies' shoes, and the place was a veritable paradise for flies.'

Marching along the main road to the waiting transport at milestone 44½, men of the Battalion reflected on the events of the past month when so many of their comrades had fallen. All, looking up on the battle-scarred hill, festooned with dangling parachutes caught up on blackened and blasted trees, wondered by what miracle they had been spared from the Japanese who were so vastly superior in numbers and armament. And so on to Dimapur, and a scene of great rejoicing as the convoy carrying the Battalion arrived at the transit camp where all other groups of the unit had already gathered, after making their way independently out of Jessami by long and devious routes. Everyone was eager to tell his story, but emotion lay in the fact that the Battalion was a united body again although the casualty list was sad and long.

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The 1st Battalion Assam Regiment had fought first at

Jessami and Kharasom as a fully equipped and complete battalion. At Kohima, it mustered only the equivalent of about two rifle companies, but these men played an important part on the perimeter of the Garrison and more particularly during the initial stages of the battle prior to 6 April. Jessami, Kharasom and finally Kohima had given all ranks a new confidence in themselves and a pride which would never be taken away.[1]

During the siege two officers and thirteen Other Ranks were killed. Three officers and eighteen Other Ranks were wounded. These casualty figures can only be approximate since the regimental office with all its records had been lost at Jessami and there was no means or time available at Kohima for recording names of those present and of those killed and wounded.

In recognition of his leadership at Jessami and Kohima, Lieutenant-Colonel Brown received the Distinguished Service Order and many other awards were made to officers and men of the battalion.[2] In addition, congratulatory messages were received from many sources particularly from the Fourteenth Army Commander, Lieutenant-General Sir William Slim, K.C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C., and from the Governor of Assam, Sir Andrew Clow, who addressed the following words to the Commanding Officer:

> 'Particulars are now available of the heroic and successful stand made by the men of the Assam Regiment against the Japanese at Jessami and Kharasom. The achievements of your battalion will, I feel sure, make countless citizens of Assam proud of their Regiment and confident of their further success. I would like to add my personal tribute to the gallantry of all concerned, including those who have fallen on the field of battle, and wish the battalion all success in its participation in the elimination of those who have invaded the Province.'

[1] See Appendix III
[2] See Appendix VII

CHAPTER VII

SOME INCIDENTS

THE PERIOD covered by the battles of Jessami, Kharasom and Kohima, is perhaps the most important, besides being the most colourful, in the history of the Assam Regiment, and of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment in particular. It serves to illustrate how a few years, or months as it was in many cases, of military training can instil in a man that sense of good discipline and loyalty, an ideal which is so essential in the making of a good regiment.

A successful withdrawal action has always been held to be the most difficult of all military manoeuvres, not only for the effect it has on the particular military situation, but because the strain on the morale of the individual soldier can be such as to destroy all his self-confidence and shatter that faith in an ideal which the gradual build-up of his training has sought to inculcate. Each officer and man of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was subjected to this strain in its severest form, and it must remain one of the proudest achievements of the unit that, when isolated and alone after the evacuation of Jessami, small groups of hill-men and plainsmen together displayed wonderful courage and resourcefulness, and never faltered in their loyalty towards the Regiment, the battle, their homeland or themselves.

It is fitting therefore to pause in the main narrative of this history to tell here the stories of a few of these groups and individuals to serve as illustrations of the many others, recorded and unrecorded, in those grim days.

* * * *

Satkhosei was a Kuki from Manipur and held the appointment of Company Havildar-Major of Headquarter Company at the time of the Jessami battle. The story of his journey to

Kohima, and beyond, after the disengagement action is crowded with adventure and is a fine example of the spirit prevailing amongst all ranks.

The evacuation of Headquarter Company positions was scheduled to take place in the early hours of the morning of 2 April. When the operation timings had to be advanced, lack of effective communications prevented the information reaching all sectors, and consequently, just before midnight Satkhosei found himself and the men of his sector alone still manning the former company perimeter. Another hour passed and then Satkhosei realized he could wait no longer, so he made his own decision and ordered his men to begin the withdrawal as originally planned. Almost immediately they were in trouble and encountered groups of Japanese who were busy investing the Battalion's position after finding it abandoned. Close contact within the party was soon lost and several men were caught and taken prisoner.

By the time Satkhosei had reached the Laniye River his party had dwindled in number to only six and he was completely isolated from the remainder of the Battalion. The small group now consisted of himself, Havildars Ngulzalam Kuki and Dewansing Kachari, Naik Saikham Kuki and Sepoys Kelhonisa Angami and Ngulkhothang Kuki. They crossed the river and struck out westwards, keeping continually on the alert and avoiding all villages by making extensive detours.

Keeping clear of the main track between Jessami and Kohima they marched by way of Parabama and Theprezumi until on the afternoon of the second day they came near Chakhabama, a village some 12 miles east of Kohima. They had been able to get water from the hill streams, but had finished the few dry rations they had carried with them. Several of the party were exhausted and unfit to continue the journey without resting first, so Satkhosei sought out a concealed position along the banks of the river below Chakhabama in which to lie up for the night. But they must have been observed by watching Japanese patrols, for they were suddenly surrounded by a large group of the Japanese,

and before they were able to resist, were taken into captivity.

With hands bound behind their backs they were marched to a headquarters camp near the village and there they were saddened to see Major Thurgood under escort of four brutal looking Japanese soldiers. His boots had been removed and his feet were cut and bleeding; across his shoulders he carried a blanket and a loose rope dangled around his neck. A close watch was kept on him and he was not allowed to approach near the new prisoners.

There were no other prisoners and, consequently, they became the centre of the Japanese attention, the butt of their crude jokes, and were given no peace. They were taunted and brutally jabbed at with rifles as they lay on the ground. Sepoy Ngulkhothang, usually so cheerful, at last could stand it no longer and retaliated with his feet, knocking down one of the Japanese officers. With eyes blazing anger the officer ordered Ngulkhothang to be seized and forced to his knees. There, in cold blood and in full view of his comrades, he was executed in the traditional Japanese way, by the sword. So Ngulkhothang died, but his name remains bright in the annals of the Assam Regiment as a symbol of its fighting spirit and defiance in the face of the brute force.

That night, still bound, suffering from cold and hunger, Satkhosei lay with the remaining five of his band, and discussed with them, in whispers, their chance of escape. There was much coming and going within the Japanese camp as if preparations were in progress for an early move. Little attention seemed to be paid to the prisoners beyond the posting of one sentry over them. This man soon fell asleep at his post and at once Ngulzalam was busy loosening the cords securing Satkhosei's wrists with his teeth. Once Satkhosei was free he set about releasing the others and then, making sure that they were not being observed, the party crawled quietly off into the jungle, collecting on the way two rifles and some grenades for good measure.

The escapers held a hurried consultation and decided

against continuing on towards Kohima, as the Japanese were obviously concentrating in that direction. Instead the party struck out south-west until, in the early hours of the following morning, they reached the main Imphal road near the village of Jakhama, some ten miles from Kohima, where they found friends able to explain the situation to them.

Kohima was under attack: it was in fact 5 April, the day on which the Japanese all but succeeded in destroying the garrison. It was a battle Satkhosei and his men were unable to join for they were busy avoiding Japanese patrols moving through the village. This was all the harder as the Japanese had prohibited all movement along roads and paths except by those whom they had employed as porters. Satkhosei realized that the only hope of avoiding notice lay in disguising his men; so all items of military clothing were carefully hidden or destroyed as they now dressed themselves as local Angami Nagas. Those members whose facial features would have given them away had to remain indoors and not venture outside.

For four days they lived and rested in Jakhama and there, Satkhosei was consulted by the village community on what action they should take when the Japanese demanded that the village should supply rice and porters. In order to prevent the reprisals which would certainly follow on outright refusal of these demands, he advized them to comply with the orders. He went further and, on one occasion, went out with two other members of his party on a porter column. The Japanese were completely deceived and never suspected the presence of Indian soldiers in their midst.

On 9 April the Japanese established a large headquarters, of about brigade strength, at Jakhama. Satkhosei now decided that it was time for him to make another escape and carry the information about the Japanese activities he had witnessed back to his own lines. He, therefore, told the villagers of his intention to make way to the west of Kohima and thence to Dimapur. He estimated that the journey would take him three days to complete, so he warned the villagers that they must evacuate Jakhama on the morning of the fourth day

because aeroplanes would then be coming to bomb and destroy the Japanese occupying the village.

Before first light on 10 April, Satkhosei and Naik Saikham slipped out of Jakhama unobserved and made their way along the slopes of Phulebudze. By-passing Kohima, they contacted advanced elements of relieving forces early on the morning of the third day. Their information was at once recorded and passed back and it made a great stir when it reached XXXIII Corps Headquarters. The determination and intelligence displayed by Satkhosei won for him high praise from both the Corps and the Divisional Commanders.

As a result of the information which Satkhosei had brought back, the Japanese headquarters at Jakhama was attacked by a strong force of bombers, and the operation proved highly successful. In addition, Satkhosei's knowledge of the country around Kohima, where he had been to school for several years, was invaluable to both Divisional Operational and Intelligence branches and was eagerly made use of. The substantial contribution the whole party had made in the struggle for Kohima gained great prestige for the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment, particularly in the eyes of Major-General Grover, under whom the unit was later to serve.

* * * *

Michael Williamson was Adjutant of the Battalion at Jessami. He, more than anyone, knew how desperate the situation really was, and it was through him that the Commanding Officer sought to retain control of the battle. Williamson knew that the situation was desperate by the time Lieutenant John Corlett arrived to deliver the message ordering an immediate withdrawal from Jessami. He also knew of the chaotic state of the communication system within the position, and how difficult it would be to issue proper orders to all the sectors. When these orders and the timing of the withdrawal were changed at the last minute, he did

his best to inform everybody and it was not through lack of effort on his part that some posts remained ignorant of the changes.

As darkness settled over the position a brief lull allowed the western sectors of the perimeter to move off under Major Calistan. Williamson went with this party of about 50, straight over the precipitious side of the hill. Over on the eastern side fighting was still going on. So the noise they made attracted no attention beyond a few stray shots from Japanese snipers up in the trees above them. They rushed the road below them and crossed over and down to the Laniye River. This was done to the accompaniment of furious barking from Corlett's white Naga dog 'Kuku' which had attached itself to the party. He eluded all efforts to catch and silence him and thoroughly enjoyed the fine game of 'Catch-as-catch-can', much to the embarrassment of all concerned.

Williamson at one stage fell head first down a nullah and discovered that he had lost his precious rifle in the process. A fruitless search followed and when he had to give it up he found that the party had gone on. Sounds of battle were coming from the direction of the bridge where the main Battalion column was fighting its way through a well-prepared ambush.

Alone and unarmed Williamson did not feel up to braving half the Japanese Army, as it seemed to him, so he made off in the other direction, hopelessly lost. As Adjutant he had not of course had the advantage that other officers had had of patrolling in the area before, and it was therefore with relief that he met up with three jawans a short while later — but not before he had seriously debated whether to lob a grenade at them, thinking that they were Japanese. Very soon they were joined by two more men and decided then to get across the river, deep and treacherous as it was.

Bright moonlight played on the icy water as they floundered across. Once over they crept up the bank and started to climb up and up the heartbreaking hill on the Phakekedzumi side of the Laniye River, until they could go no further.

Exhausted and shivering they huddled together in their damp clothing and prayed for the dawn.

When it was light enough they pushed on. 'Adjutant Sahib, which way shall we go?' asked one of the men. Williamson did not know how to answer but, on looking down to the river, he saw a party of ten or so by the water's edge. Believing them to be from the Battalion, he pointed down the hill and said, 'That way'. Down they went again and there met up with Captain Anscombe and his party, but only to discover that they were lost and without food like themselves. On they went following the flow of the river but this took them southwards, a direction which they knew was not the one they should follow. So once more, slowly and laboriously, they began to climb the hill.

None of them was in good shape by this time, least of all Anscombe, who confided to Williamson that he believed his heart was seriously affected by the strain and exhaustion. At dusk they had still not reached the top; but such was their need that they took a chance and lit a fire. The warmth of the small flames and glowing embers revived them a little, but sleep was again impossible. Anscombe whispered to Williamson that he could go no further and begged to be left behind, even suggesting that he might be shot rather than slow up the party any more. This horrible suggestion could not be countenanced for one moment, but something had to be done for they could not afford to sit out on that hillside once dawn came again. Williamson therefore decided to leave two reliable men behind with Anscombe and go on himself in search of a Naga village to get help and porters.

We shall never know the truth of what happened to Anscombe after that. Though a gentle character, he was also very determined, and after Williamson had been gone some time he ordered the two men to leave him and make their way back to Kohima. Should they have obeyed this order? This is a point which could be argued at length, but the fact is that they were sepoys and they obeyed the order of an officer. Anscombe was clearly obsessed by the thought that he was endangering the lives of too many men,

and what he did must have been influenced by this thought. Whatever happened, we can be sure that, as he lay incapacitated in Japanese occupied territory he had the determination, as he had the means, to sell his life dearly. 'Annie', always a perfect gentleman and a brilliant intellect, was sadly missed when the Battalion gathered its scattered segments together again after the Kohima battle.

Williamson, when he left with his party, had pressed on slowly until finally he reached a village, only to find it already occupied by the Japanese. However, they crept unnoticed into one of the houses and called for the headman to come and see them. The villagers were naturally frightened and bewildered by the sudden turn of events that had made their peaceful country a battlefield, and the headman insisted that our troops should leave the village immediately. Williamson agreed to do so only after he had obtained from the headman a promise to send out a stretcher party to find Anscombe and help him to safety.

Williamson and his party now wandered off in the general direction of Kohima, utterly exhausted. To make matters worse Williamson started to go blind from shock and starvation. His companions had to lead him along the path until they reached another village where they could rest, eat and regain some sense of hope.

Kohima was barred to them and Japanese parties were frequently encountered and had to be eluded, so they decided to strike northwards to Mokokchung. This journey took them another week to cover, picking up as they went along more and more stragglers from Jessami. They were now amongst friendly villages and the Nagas were only too anxious to help with guides, shelter and food. Williamson recalls how at an Ao village he was given an enormous double bed to sleep in and pillows with 'Home Sweet Home' embroidered on them. Villages such as this were indeed home to many of the men making that desperate journey during those perilous days.

At Mokokchung the party was greeted by the Sub-Divisional Officer, who had remained at his post busy

organizing his Nagas into resistance bands. When the party arrived at the rear base they were greeted by Major Sidhiman Rai and the Quartermaster with the words, 'Where have you been? You are supposed to be dead.' Willie's' reply is happily not recorded.

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Lance-Naik Thangkama Lushai from Chaltlang village was a member of the Signal Platoon. Sunrise on the morning of 1 April found him crouching in the road junction bunker attending to his task of maintaining communications with the Command Post. Jessami had already been surrounded for four days. The atmosphere in the bunker was tense. Several of his comrades had been wounded and his teammate Sepoy Paudama Lushai had been killed when they had tried to replace and patch up damaged lengths of signal wire the previous afternoon. Thangkama knew little comfort when the telephone went dead again in his hands.

As the battle raged around them that afternoon, word came through that everyone was to get away from Jessami as soon as possible after it was dark. But dusk deepened into evening as they battled on, and the opportunity to get out never came.

Bren guns and rifles chattered and blazed defiantly at the Japanese lurking in the jungle undergrowth nearby. Time and again the bunker was punished by direct hits from Japanese 'Whizz-bang' guns and it was not long before the roof started to cave in. Dust choked the throats and filled the eyes of the defenders, while someone murmered "This is it'.

Thangkama took his place in the firing line; communications no longer existed with any other post nor was it worth trying to restore the line. Darkness was fast closing in on Jessami.

Near midnight, a Japanese party of about ten men attacked the bunker but was driven off. Another attack followed much later, but this time from the rear, and the

defenders then realized that the perimeter must have been breached. What they did not know was that most of the garrison was already fighting its way out of Jessami towards the Laniye River. Both bren guns, jammed with dust and dirt, stood silent, their barrels smoking and glowing gently in the dark. Rifles and pistols still kept the attackers at bay, but dawn came and with it all hope faded. The stillness of the morning chill was broken by groups of Japanese talking in loud voices all around them and then they heard someone call out to them in Hindustani that Jessami had been captured. The weary little band, knowing the truth of this assertion, had only one course open to them.

Thangkama crawled out and raised his hands in token of surrender. One by one the others followed him and were taken into captivity by squat little men with short legs and dull ugly faces.

During the days that followed, the men were kept hard at work collecting stores about Jessami and then set to carry rations for their captors along the road to Kohima. Once they thought they saw 2nd-Lieutenant Abdul Wahid, the Medical Officer, but could not be sure. Each night they were collected together, given a miserable portion of plain half-cooked rice and then had their hands tied behind their backs, being roughly handled in the process. They huddled together for warmth and comfort, but sleep was impossible. One of them hummed a Lushai song quietly to himself, others took up the melody until they were hoarsely silenced by their guards. Escape was in the minds of all of them, but they had to bide their time until an opportunity came.

Their chance came sooner than they had expected. As the supply column approached the village of Chakhabama, fighter planes of the Royal Air Force swooped low overhead. All, guards and captives, dived for cover, but Thangkama on dropping his load took to his heels and was off into the jungle as fast as his legs could carry him. A few bullets ripped past him but as he lay with thumping heart he could at first detect no sounds of pursuit. Then he heard a faint rustling noise nearby and as the sound came nearer he

prepared to grapple with his pursuer. But it was Sepoy Jamkhokai Kuki, another member of the party, who wriggled into sight. So at least two of them had made good their escape.

Together they began to make their way northwards, hoping it would be to safety. Slipping past the villages of Viswema and Merema, both occupied by the enemy, they moved cautiously, avoiding all Naga habitations and main paths. Twice they came across Angami families hiding in the jungle, from them they obtained a little food and felt the warmth of being back in the company of friends. Then on again, until after four more days they dropped down from the hills to begin the final lap to Dimapur.

Suddenly from somewhere near at hand came the sound of tree-felling and then the noise of a lorry starting up. They crept to the edge of a clearing and there met a group of Allied soldiers, who were most startled at seeing the two ragged and grubby sepoys and, of course, took them at first to be Japanese.

But all ended well and soon Thangkama and Jamkhokai were riding in comfort to Dimapur.

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Dimapur, as it was in April 1944, presented a vastly different picture from the one which had greeted the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment on its first arrival there two years previously. The dank tangled jungle undergrowth which had dominated the whole area, save a few acres around the railway siding and bazaar, had now been cleared and pushed back for miles around. A large wooden township of sheds and storehouses and railway sidings had sprung up, holding a huge quantity of supplies.

The base stretched out along either side of the broad metalled road, which had replaced the old narrow road, right up to Nichuguard, nine miles away, where the Brahmaputra Valley came to an abrupt end and the road began to curl upwards into the Naga Hills.

Not only the Fourteenth Army was concerned with the security of this widespread base, which, if threatened, could easily become a terrible embarrassment. Far away to the north-east operated General Joseph Stilwell's Chinese divisions. Dimapur lay astride their main line of communication and, if it were taken, they would be placed in an impossible position. Only a few weeks previously the war had been far removed from the town. The nearest enemy had been over 200 miles away across jungle covered mountains. Now in March 1944, the impossible had happened and the Japanese were advancing with alarming swiftness on the base. The Allied commanders had every reason to be apprehensive.

As the garrison defenders checked the flood of the Japanese advance and clung grimly to their positions at Kohima, officers and men of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment began arriving at Dimapur. Some were returning from leave or from hospital, others came in from across the hills from Jessami. Soon they numbered more than a hundred and were busy preparing a camp for themselves and for the Battalion when it should join them as well as adding their strength to the scattered defences of the base. Dimapur was at that time a town of rumours, orders and counter-orders. Barbed wire surrounded everything and slit trenches were everywhere. No one could move without showing an identity card or giving a password. But wire, trenches and passwords were only an illusion of security, for there were few trained troops to defend the base against the Japanese who had so suddenly appeared on the scene. Dimapur in fact suffered a bad attack of the 'jitters'.

One sector contained the prisoner-of-war cage and to this all men entering the base from any of the forward areas were directed. There had been many instances of desertion from Kohima during the initial stages of the fighting there and some units had utterly disgraced themselves. It was, therefore, a very wise precaution to segregate these dangers to security and morale until they were proved otherwise. It was interesting that whereas all stragglers from other units

were detained in the cage for intensive screening, all men of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment were ordered to be automatically cleared. This was taken, as it was meant, as a high compliment and each morning an officer of the unit would go down to collect the men as they came in.

It was unfortunate that Subedar-Major Jatiya arrived one night bedraggled and without badges of rank. He was unceremoniously herded in with the rest and his explanation about his identity and the adventures which had befallen him escaping from Jessami was received with scant sympathy. The grand old man was furious and retired in high dudgeon to a solitary tent which he refused to leave until Lieutenant Lloyd Jones arrived the next morning to bail him out. The Subedar-Major's sense of humour gradually returned, however, and before long he was in command of the situation again as immaculate as ever.

This war of nerves at Dimapur went on, but the Japanese did not come any closer. Other fighting formations arrived from India and moved up to Kohima. 'Haines' Horse', a scratch armoured car squadron named after Brigadier Haines the commander of 253rd Sub-Area continued to patrol the base while men of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment prepared for the day when they would welcome their Commanding Officer and all their comrades from Kohima. The siege there was drawing to a close.

When the long-awaited day came and they arrived, haggard and dirty, the camp inside the Base Ordnance Depot was ready. Every man was given a hot bath and a hot meal and slept under canvas and between sheets for the first time for many weeks. Every officer had a bed and every man a stretcher. It was a fine welcome and one that they had thoroughly deserved.

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Kohima was under desperate attack but the obstinate Japanese continued to defend their positions with stubborn-

ness. The 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was on Ring Contour — for this was the month of May 1944 — but Captain Nigel Stock was outside these activities and could only follow the fortunes for the Battalion from a Staff desk at 202nd Area Headquarters and wished that he was back with his old unit.

His opportunity came when he was sent on liaison duties to the Battalion and stayed with them even after they passed from command of 202nd Area to the direct command of 2nd British Infantry Division. His dilemma about returning to his staff duties was solved when the opportunity came his way of taking out a patrol which Divisional Headquarters had proposed. Its task was to go behind the Japanese lines round the right flank to see what they were doing in the rear area round the village of Meram about 35 miles south of Kohima on the main road to Imphal.

Stock immediately asked for some men from the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment to go with him and to this Lieutenant-Colonel Brown agreed. Bearing in mind the difficulties of language and terrain he would encounter on the way, he selected Naik Dilhu Angami, a Tangkhul and a Kuki, while his orderly, Lukawnga Lushai, made the fourth member of the party.

Lightly armed and dressed they moved off to begin their hazardous trip. First by way of Khonoma and then south along the western rain-drenched slopes of Phulebudze and Japvo. The thick jungle was quiet, but they took no chances and moved forward cautiously. When a village was sighted Dilhu would sneak off to see if all was clear and then the party would be signalled in and given a tremendous welcome from all the villagers. When news had been exchanged, and they had taken food and drink too, off into the jungle the little band would go again.

So they went on for four more days until they turned eastwards and made for the main road. Another day brought them to the crest of a ridge running parallel with the road, and to a Kuki village where they learnt that Japanese troops were near. Stock now thought it best to discard their uni-

forms and to disguise his party, himself included, as Nagas.

Arms and clothing were therefore carefully dumped in the village and Lukawnga set guard over them, while Dilhu got to work cutting Stock's hair Naga fashion with a very blunt pair of scissors. This task done, the officer had now to be camouflaged. To much laughter and comment he was stripped, his body smeared with pig's fat and then quantities of soot collected from the hearth were plastered all over him. It was a messy smelly business and Stock, who had trained for the stage before joining the army, thought, perhaps a little wistfully, of his former dressing-room. Anyway, the operation being over he looked an authentic Naga with all the arm and leg trappings, a little tall maybe and certainly the object of curiosity for a mass of plaguey flies. Off the party set down the slope.

They crept down to the road and watched from their hiding place above Meram. Japanese in large numbers were gathered in and around the village. There was much coming and going of patrols and the Japanese had there some motor transport. Meram seemed to be an important post in the rear of the Japanese. Stock and his three stalwarts remained all that day and on into the following night, watching, listening and taking note of all they could. As dawn approached they moved back to the friendly Kuki village, their task completed. Meram had been found to be solidly defended, and any approach route over the hills from the west to it would be difficult except for a small lightly equipped force.

They did not stay long at the village but pushed on again with all possible speed to make their report. Three days later, they were back to Two Tree Hill where the Battalion rear base was located.

The Battalion Quartermaster, on his return from a visit to Ring Contour noticed the usual small group of Nagas around his ration stores but was most surprised to be hailed by one of them as he approached. On closer inspection he saw that one of them was wearing spectacles and that it was

Nigel Stock. Still dressed in his borrowed finery, Nigel was later interviewed by the Divisional Commander and made quite a stir at the General's headquarters.

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Throughout the preceding stories there runs a theme—the great part played by the Naga villagers in helping our men to escape. It may be considered invidious to single out the Nagas for special praise in this record, when the kinsmen of all the other classes enlisted into the Assam Regiment also did such sterling work for the Allied cause during the dark days of 1944. But a great many men of the Battalion owe their lives to the Nagas and a word of praise cannot therefore be withheld.

On 30 March the decision was taken to sacrifice the garrisons at Jessami and Kharasom in the interest of the defence of Dimapur. In the light of subsequent events it was a terribly wrong decision. That the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment in spite of being abandoned went on to extricate itself by its own efforts from a seemingly hopeless position and re-form later as a reasonably intact fighting force exposed the limitations of Command on the Assam Valley front at that time.

When the story of Jessami became known it was held in high military circles that other units could have fought as fine an action as the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment, but few if any others, would have made their way out to fight another day. It would however have been a very different story had the withdrawal been conducted through hostile country. Quite the reverse was in fact the case. All along the route out of Jessami and Kharasom, the Nagas — whether Angamis, Semas, Rengmas, Lothas or Aos — were magnificently loyal and helpful.

When men of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment began arriving in villages such as Chipoketami, Sakhai and Sakhalu, Wokha or far away Mokokchung, they were welcomed, fed and guided on their way until they had

finally eluded the Japanese. There was no question of payment or reward and often, when Japanese troops were in actual occupation of a village, these operations involved grave risks and dangers.

As soldiers, we passed through and left their villages. They remained to rebuild their ravished villages and ruined cultivations. But there are few officers or men of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment who do not recall with gratitude the days when the Nagas befriended them when they had dire need of help.

CHAPTER VIII

KOHIMA RECAPTURED

6 June 1944

SINCE his arrival in the Kohima area, the Japanese had built up strong and well placed defensive positions running along the entire length of the Kohima ridge. The flanks of this stronghold rested on the lower slopes of the Phulebudze feature in the west and stretched out eastwards to include the villages of Merema and Cheswema. The formidable task confronting XXXIII Corps made necessary the use and deployment of every available active unit.

After gathering at Dimapur on 20 April, 1st Battalion Assam Regiment immediately set about reorganizing and re-equipping itself. It was given three days in which to do this before the unit was expected to move forward again to resume responsibility for the firm base located at Piphema at milestone 28 on the main road. The greater part of its stores had been destroyed during the preceding month and many of its personnel were still scattered and remained unlocated. However, some semblance of order was created and the unit was ready to move at the appointed time. A small 'B' Echelon remained behind, composed mainly of the sick, under command of the Quartermaster, and was incorporated into 203rd Base Ordnance Depot defensive box.

At Piphema the Battalion occupied an area of some considerable size which included four separate hill features. Reinforcements had not been received to make good the casualties suffered during the siege battles and consequently the Battalion was much under strength. As a strong point in the rear of the Corps' front, the position was most unsatisfactory and it harboured a large number of attached and non-effective units. Fortunately, the Battalion was not called on to repulse any attacks while they were there and, although

constant patrolling was carried out to ensure that the Japanese did not try to infiltrate along the Zubza Valley or the ridges to the west, no contact was made. Piphema, however, became an important listening post and information centre as Naga braves came to the Battalion from farflung villages to report on the situation and recount Japanese movement in their villages. Several very ancient rifles were obtained from the District Commissioner and these were distributed to reliable Angami warriors. One recipient showed his gratitude by returning a few days later with several Japanese heads in a sack brought, as he explained, as evidence of the effectiveness of his newly acquired weapon and of his skill as a marksman.

On 27 April, Captain J. E. Taylor, with one company under command, moved further up the road to milestone 32½ and took over another firm base there in order to release the troops formerly in occupation for operations against Kohima. It seemed that the Battalion was destined not to remain static much longer and this was confirmed after a visit to the unit by the Corps Commander and Major-General Grover the next day. There was nothing wrong with the morale of the unit, but the conditions under which the men were expected to serve were most unreasonable even when the gravity and urgency of the Kohima situation was taken into consideration. No ground-sheets or waterproof capes were available and few men had even a change of clothing. Monsoon conditions prevailed, trenches filled with water most nights and the surrounding area was fast becoming a morass of soft wet mud. As a result of shocking living conditions and general fatigue, the sick rate rose to alarming proportions. But it was not until 4 May that the position was improved by an issue to all ranks of the new olive green battle dress which had now been adopted throughout the Fourteenth Army.

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In the mean time, the Japanese resistance was proving

more formidable than the allied commanders had anticipated and it was clear that the battle for Kohima would not be lightly accomplished. The Japanese had everywhere demonstrated their amazing ability for taking severe punishment and still holding firm, together with superb ingenuity and knowledge in constructing and siting inter-supporting positions. In order to lend additional weight to the attack 33rd Brigade of 7th Indian Infantry Division, formerly held as Corps reserve at Dimapur, was brought up to reinforce the attacking troops. The Corps Commander held the view that the establishment of firm bases had been overdone and subsequently 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was invited to leave the rear areas and take an active part in the final attack on Kohima. This was only a request but Lieutenant-Colonel Brown immediately accepted the offer.

On 7 May the four under-strength rifle companies were reformed to produce two strong companies and in this state the Battalion moved forward to milestone 44 after handing over the Piphema area to detachments of the Assam Rifles.

On arrival at Divisional Headquarters the Commanding Officer was told that the battalion was to come under command of 33rd Indian Infantry Brigade and also that there was a strong possibility that the unit would be linked with the 4th Battalion 1st Gorkha Rifles, who had suffered heavy casualties and whose numbered strength was at that time little more than two companies. The plan to unite the two battalions commended itself in no way to either party and was fortunately abandoned on 8 May after the Battalion had already arrived at the Gorkha defence position on a hill feature above Divisional Headquarters.

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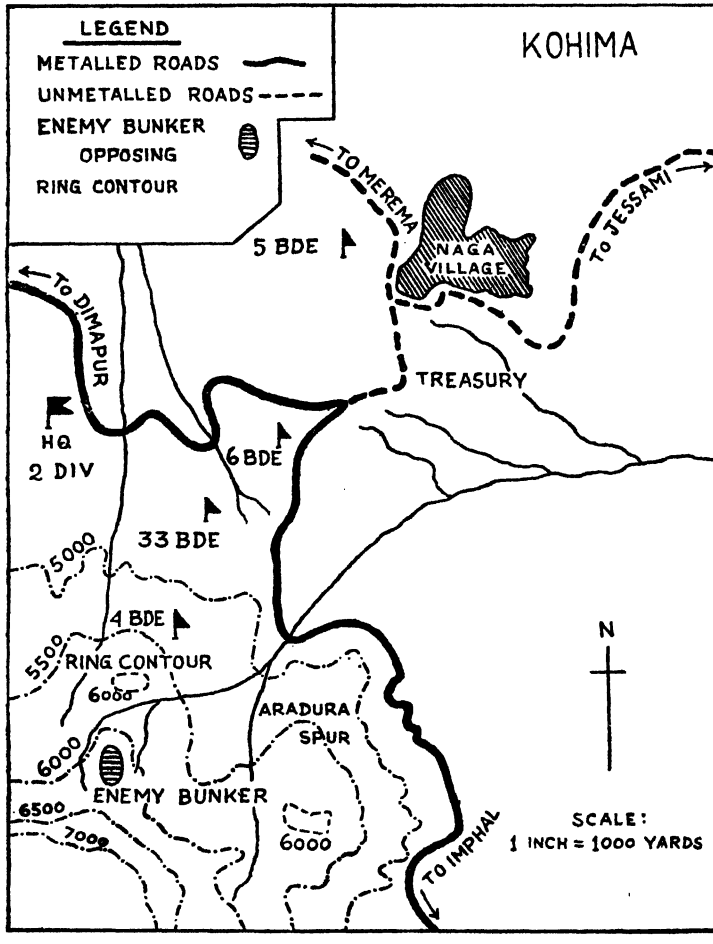
The change of plans provided now for the Battalion to operate in an independent role in the first instance before coming under command of 4th Brigade on the right flank. The task was to capture an enemy bunker situated on the lower slopes of Phulebudze and which had caused consider-

able trouble to units of the Brigade operating above GPT Ridge. The strength and extent of the bunker was not known, but it had defied two previous assaults by British



troops and, was now being watched and contained to some measure by a company of the 4th Battalion 15th Punjab Regiment.

Captain Taylor was ordered on 8 May to take over from the Punjabi troops with his composite company and make preparations to attack and capture the bunker. Lieutenants Stock, Steyn and Khan went with him as platoon commanders. The other company, temporarily commanded by Lieutenant F. D. Warren, was detailed to porter stores up the hill and act as protection to the sixty mules made available to the Battalion. At midday the column moved off and wound up the slippery jungle-clad hill and two hours later reached the summit to join up with the Punjabis.

Thick wet jungle surrounded the entire area, visibility ended in a green curtain only a few yards away and a strange silence gripped the hill top. The Punjabi company had been unable to define the limits of the Japanese bunker and this now became the primary task before a successful assault could be staged. Using unorthodox methods and initiative Captain Taylor sent two of his platoons forward. At intervals men were detailed to fire into the undergrowth to draw the enemy retaliatory fire and force the Japanese to disclose their positions. Four men were wounded in this unusual operation, but in the end an oval-shaped bunker was discovered across a small depression and no more than 80 yards to south of the Company Headquarters position. The size of the bunker suggested that it could contain at least two companies, but Japanese fire had been only slight and it was therefore considered that the position was not held in strength, perhaps one company with four or possibly more machine-guns. Daylight was fast fading and it was thought advisable to dig in for the night, rest the men and be ready for an attack at dawn. Trenches were dug and men wormed and dodged their way forward to lay out trip wire. Two more casualties were suffered but a fairly good position had been prepared by the time the troops settled down to begin the night watch. At dusk artillery had registered defensive fire targets around the bunker and there was nothing more to be done but wait for the morning.

At about 2200 hours the Japanese suddenly attacked and fire opened along the length of the perimeter as the attack

became general. Extensive use of grenades was made by both sides, but many of the Japanese bombs failed to explode. Once again men of the Battalion heard the blood-curdling cry 'Banzai', but the shouts died away and the attack failed to penetrate the trip wire. Often a distance of only a few yards separated the Japanese from our forward trenches in the ferocity of the attack. One of them crawled up behind a large tree and from the security of the trunk lobbed grenades at one of our bren gunners. Magazine after magazine was poured into the tree but always back came a grenade to the disgust of the bren gunner. Then down came a barrage of 25-pounder shells on the bunker and the attack slackened. It now became clear that the Japanese had had enough and were drawing off leaving jitter parties to occupy the company's attention. By 0430 hours quiet reigned again. Remarkably few casualties were suffered during that night. Two men were killed and ten were wounded, but none of the latter needed to be evacuated beyond the Regimental Aid Post. At first light two strong fighting patrols crept forward to investigate the bunker. The position was silent: the Japanese had gone.

Captain Taylor lost no time in occupying the bunker. Several of the Japanese casualties were discovered in the undergrowth, all of whom were minus the right hand in accordance with the Japanese custom of cremating the dead (or part of them) and sending the ashes back to the ancestral family shrines at home in Japan. Large quantities of stores and equipment were also found abandoned on the position but most of it was rubbish and useless to us. Contact had been lost, but was re-established when a patrol went out to link up with part of the Royal Scots Regiment on a feature to the west. The Japanese were encountered on the way and in the ensuing action three of them were killed and the others fled up the hill. It was a great disappointment to discover later that the British troops, despairing of the capture of the bunker astride their line of advance, had withdrawn during the night and the Japanese now occupied the Royal Scots' former position. This was indeed an un-

fortunate occurrence for the Japanese were now entrenched in a position which was later to become the pivot of their defence when they strove to hold a line along Aradura Spur.

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During the next week the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment found numerous patrols to protect the west flank of the British division. Fighting patrols were sent up to the feature above Ring Contour, as the Battalion's new position had now been named, but the area was thickly covered with tangled jungle, the gradient was exceptionally steep and in many places water courses had cut sheer cliffs into the hillside. It was difficult, operating over such country, to collect accurate information about the size and strength of the Japanese bunker, but it was clear that the position was well fortified and all possible approach routes to it were closely guarded.

The Brigade Commander, Brigadier J. A. Theobalds, D.S.O., urged 1st Battalion Assam Regiment to intensify its efforts to find a suitable attack route to the bunker and this became the harrowing and costly task of the Battalion during the next weeks, while the main flood of fighting went on around the Kohima ridge and the Naga village. On 13 May, Lieutenant Warren and a patrol succeeded in penetrating the position from the south, but were immediately detected and the patrol leader was killed as he climbed into one of the Japanese dug-outs. The patrol was forced to withdraw after inflicting two casualties on the Japanese. An earlier patrol along the northern face of the feature had also met with determined resistance. Further west another patrol discovered a second bunker in mutual support of the first and it was then clear that the task given to the Battalion was beyond its limited resources.

As heavy rains beat down on the surrounding jungle and on the sector positions, an atmosphere of uneasy tension mounted on Ring Contour. The hazardous activities of seeking out the unseen Japanese frayed the nerves of all

those who took part in the frequent fighting and ambush patrols. Casualties were daily inflicted and suffered, and rarely did a patrol return to submit a negative report. Morale remained consistently high and the operations were undertaken and executed with the skill of hardened veterans. If, as some grumbled, the Battalion had been forgotten in its isolated position, this was only because the Brigade and its sister formations were fully occupied elsewhere.

On the night 10/11 May 4th Brigade launched an attack on the Japanese-held lower slopes of GPT Ridge, and 33rd Brigade advanced at dawn to attack Jail Hill and the DIS position. Extremely heavy fighting ensued but the attacks were pressed home with great determination in the face of stubborn resistance and withering machine-gun fire. By midday, the Japanese had been cleared from most of their bunkers on GPT Ridge, Jail Hill and FSD, although they still remained in possession of some isolated posts which withstood all assaults. The attacking troops suffered severe casualties during the battle, which was fought in rain and mud. Meanwhile on the eastern flank, the 4th Battalion 1st Gorkha Rifles had infiltrated with considerable skill on to Treasury Hill and had linked up with elements of 5th Brigade in the Naga village area.

With the completion of this operation the Kohima township area and the old Garrison area were cleared of the Japanese, but Kohima could not yet be considered a firm base. The Japanese still occupied all the northern and eastern part of the Naga village, and were denying to XXXIII Corps' formations the use of the Imphal road. The tasks for the next phase of the battle were therefore clear, and plans for the reduction of the Japanese final strong points could be laid.

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The Japanese in their commanding positions over the Imphal road and the Jessami track, proved as stubborn in their defence as during the previous phase of the battle.

Any optimism engendered by the successes of 13 May were not in the event justified and the advancing forces on their respective fronts were pinned down when attempting to resume the advance.

From Ring Contour the patrolling activity of 1st Battalion Assam Regiment continued undiminished. The Japanese bunker had now assumed a new importance since it formed part of the Aradura Spur bastion and guarded the western flank of that defensive line. On 16 May mortars were brought into the attack and, for the next five days, a concentrated barrage was laid down at intervals during the day and night. But even this failed to force the Japanese to abandon the bunker however unpleasant their position was. Each successive patrol sent out was engaged and turned back. Other units besides the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment now operated in the area, but they fared no better.

On 18 May, three officer reinforcements were welcomed to the Battalion on their arrival from Shillong and prospects of some relief in the incessant round of patrols seemed possible for the other officers. This was however not to be the case. On the night of their arrival the new officers received their baptism of fire when the enemy attacked Ring Contour, although with negative results. A few days later one of the newcomers left again on posting to the Parachute Regiment, and another, 2nd-Lieutenant R. B. Cocksedge, in command of a patrol on 26 May, was severely wounded by a grenade as he crawled forward to investigate the Japanese bunker. In spite of his injuries he displayed great coolness and insisted on recovering his Sten-gun before allowing himself to be carried back to Ring Contour. His sadly short career with the Assam Regiment ended with the amputation of his right leg and he returned to England. Another officer casualty was Lieutenant A. R. Khan, who a few days later was severely burned about the face and body when a phosphorus grenade exploded in his hands. So, instead of less work, those officers remaining in action had more to do than ever.

On 26 May, leading troops of the attacking division moved

to the Aradura Spur front and took up position — the final assault was about to be staged. All efforts were immediately concentrated on finding approach routes up the escarpment to Aradura — a hazardous task for the patrols sent out and many casualties were suffered before the area had been satisfactorily surveyed. Throughout this reconnaissance operation, which lasted until 2 June, 1st Battalion Assam Regiment played its important part. At last the Brigade build-up was complete and the attack launched, but no success could be achieved that day by the 6th British Infantry Brigade. The tremendous difficulties of terrain made worse by rain slowed up the attack and it was called off after one of the battalions taking part failed to adhere to orders laid down. It was clear that more detailed preparation would have to be made if Aradura was to be reduced.

On 4 June, excitement ran high when one of the 1st Battalion's patrol reported that the Japanese had abandoned the bunker above Ring Contour. The position was immediately occupied and a company box formed from which patrols fanned out to find the Japanese and determine their intentions. This withdrawal was the first indication that Japanese resistance was weakening and when 6th British Infantry Brigade put in another full-scale attack on Aradura the next day, they met with only half-hearted opposition. The Japanese fortifications were breached and completely secure in the hands of the attacking troops by late afternoon on 7 June.

In the Naga village area 7th Indian Infantry Division had taken over from 5th Brigade and had struck hard at the Japanese in their last bunker positions on that sector of the front. On 2 June, after a day of intense artillery bombardment and strafing by fighter-bombers, the battle of the Naga village reached its climax. The Japanese defences were reduced to a shambles and no longer being able to continue the struggle they withdrew to the east. Documents captured later showed that the Japanese general did this 'with tears in my eyes' and one may wonder what was the fate of the

commander who had already refused to send one of his regiments away to join in the attack on Imphal (124th Regiment had been ordered to 15th Division) and had then been defeated into the bargain.

With the fall of Kohima village and Aradura Spur, the final phase of this epic battle came to an end. Casualties had been suffered by the attacking forces on a scale hitherto unknown in the Burma theatre of operations, and many units of the attacking formations had been decimated. The battle had been crowded with glorious incidents of devotion to duty and personal courage. Above all, the myth concerning the invincibility of the Japanese had been effectively exploded. In all this the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment had played a very creditable part and decidedly earned the congratulations sent to it by Major-General Grover.[1]

* * * *

From Kohima, XXXIII Crops continued its advance, against now almost negligible resistance, along the main Imphal-Dimapur road. At 1030 hours, on 22 June, the leading elements of the forward division made contact with troops of IV Corps pressing northwards at milestone 109 near the village of Karong. Shortly afterwards, the road was officially declared open and the siege of Imphal was raised. Now with the completion of all its tasks, XXXIII Corps could go forward in joint action with IV Corps to pursue the enemy and drive him back through the hills to the banks of the Chindwin from where he had come. Encouraging were the words of the Viceroy, Lord Wavell, when he visited the battle front:

> 'You will find that, when the history of the war comes to be written, the recent fighting will be put down as one of the turning points of the war, when the Japanese were routed and their downfall really began. Not only have you inflicted a tremendous defeat on the enemy

[1] See Appendix IV

but, even more, you have dealt a damaging blow to his morale — and it is the breaking of the enemy's morale that finishes wars in the end.'

The 1st Battalion Assam Regiment did not accompany the advancing formations from Kohima. In two and a half months they had seen the beautiful Naga Hills become a battle-field, battered and charred, numerous village destroyed and the people scattered, but on 13 June, as we moved down from Ring Contour on the way to Shillong to rest and refit, we hoped that the sun would shine and children play again in Kohima.

At Dimapur our old friends, the Assam Rifles, were again encountered. They too had suffered badly but yet again they put everything they had at the disposal of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment and the bonds of friendship were further strengthened. The kukri and the dao could look back with pride on their joint achievements.

As the 1st Battalion returned to its old training area at Shillong, from which it had sallied two years before, untried and inexperienced, it was given a magnificent welcome. Men of the Training Battalion lined the road for over a mile to cheer the convoy. It was a triumphant homecoming, the Battalion was justly proud of what it had done and the Training Battalion was closely associated with those achievements. It was also a dramatic and emotional homecoming when friend met friend to rejoice and to recount adventures, while others searched the ranks vainly for the many who would never return but who had died so bravely on the battle-fields of Jessami, Kharasom and at Kohima.

CHAPTER IX

SHILLONG — MADRAS

1 December 1941 — 1 September 1944

THE STORY and fortunes of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment having been recorded thus far, it is necessary now to glance back and trace the development of the other units comprising the Regiment.

As soon as it was decided that the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment should relieve the 3rd Battalion 8th Gorkha Rifles of their emergency role on the eastern frontier and was earmarked to join one of the new divisions to be raised in the following spring, recommendations were made to General Headquarters that some sort of sister unit would be required at once for the purpose of training and holding reinforcements for the 1st Battalion. Certainly, it was argued, the Battalion would be in no position to provide such reinforcements for itself when on active service.

Lieutenant-Colonel Howman envisaged that his unit would require replacements at a rate of 80 per month once the Battalion went into action and, although the formation of a training unit would entail considerable transfers of trained personnel, he held that the project was so worth while that any small disruption of the efficiency so far achieved by the Battalion could be easily borne. As usual when something entirely new is being created, vision and foresight are of paramount importance. It was one of the blessings of those early days that the Regiment had such men at the helm.

Again, as they had done so often before, old friends of the unit, both in military and civil circles, vigorously backed these proposals. Before the 1st Battalion left Shillong for Digboi, Lieutenant-Colonel Howman had the satisfaction of hearing that General Headquarters had accepted the

need for the Regiment to expand and had issued orders for a Training Company to be raised not later than 1 December, 1941.

Linked with the question of a permanent training unit was the matter of a second battalion for the Regiment. Earlier, a senior officer from Delhi, after inspecting the 1st Battalion had observed that 'the general standard of the unit, the bearing of its personnel and its *esprit-de-corps* is quite remarkable.' In his view, the excellent quality of men recruited into the Assam Regiment was such that he strongly recommended the raising of another battalion.

As we know, this recommendation was accepted and, in the following November, it was learned that General Headquarters planned to use the newly created Training Company, when formed, as the nucleus for the 2nd Battalion, which was itself to come into being on 15 April of the next year. In the meantime, the new training unit would make every effort to bring itself up to its full authorized establishment of 440 all ranks as quickly as possible. It was proposed that the unit would, later in April, be temporarily merged into the new battalion, but would be born again once the 2nd Battalion could stand on its own feet.

With this ultimate object in mind, Captain Bhola Singh Lama, a regular soldier of considerable experience, who had joined the 1st Battalion at the time of its raising from 8th Gorkha Rifles, got down to it. The 1st Battalion had already left for Digboi and Japanese troops had launched their attack on the Malay peninsula. The task of forming a training unit for the Regiment was, therefore, more urgent than ever before.

The camp at Elephant Falls was too big and too far away from Shillong and other military units to be suitable at that time for the new unit, lacking as it did established administrative organization or transport of any kind. It was decided, therefore, that although officers and instructors were to be provided by the 1st Battalion for all regimental purposes, the unit would come under the local command and administration of the 7th Gorkha Rifles Regimental Centre. And so the new Training Company moved down to occupy

part of Sidi Barrani Lines in Happy Valley and take its place alongside its new foster parent.

All the old ghosts which had haunted the 1st Battalion throughout its raising period six months previously now reappeared on the scene to plague the new unit. Luckily, some of the training gear made or borrowed by the 1st Battalion while in Shillong had been inherited, but the problem of how to get adequate arms and equipment continued to be just as formidable as the provision of recruits in suitable numbers. The gap caused by insufficient trained instructors was filled as a result of the excellent relations which existed between the new unit and the Gorkha Training Centre. In the initial stages, much practical help as well as material advice was given by the Commandant of the latter to make easier the task which confronted Captain Lama.

Gradually, some definite form of order took place. While Captain Lama and Lieutenant Douglas Cooksey, who had been posted from the 1st Battalion to assist him, wrestled with their many problems, another new branch of the Regiment was slowly also taking shape — the Records and Accounts Section. This very important branch was presided over by Jemedar Jibeswar Chetia, who, having served for many years as a clerk with the Assam Rifles, now brought considerable knowledge and understanding to the appointment. His contribution to the Regiment in this particular sphere was outstanding and was later recognized when he was raised to full commissioned rank, eventually assuming complete charge of a greatly expanded Records Section in 1946.

As the new year of 1942 began, the strength of the Company gradually assumed more dignified proportions as daily more and more volunteers came in from the hill districts and plains of the Assam Province. There were to be no fixed proportions by class; it was intended to emulate the wise and sensible lead given by the 1st Battalion in this matter, that all men once enlisted would be treated in the same way regardless of tribe or religion. Officers

also began to arrive from training schools in India, and a short while later from the 1st Battalion, as April approached and preparations were put in hand for the inauguration ceremony of the 2nd Battalion. One of these newcomers was Lieutenant Priya Brata Singh, the younger brother of His Highness, the Maharaja of Manipur.

By 14 April, there were collected some seven officers and 450 men to take the field on the following day under Lieutenant-Colonel I. N. Macleod at a parade attended by many high military and civil officials in Shillong. The general war situation in the South East Asia theatre did not warrant great celebrations and, once the parade was over, the serious business of organizing the men into their proper platoons and companies was tackled. But that evening the men of the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment sat down for their first 'Bara Khana' and the Battalion was well and truly launched.

* * * *

The new unit, as it got down to the tribulations of basic training, remained as happily free from either internal or external distractions of a domestic or political nature, as had its senior sister battalion before it. Captain D. K. Macfarlane, the Adjutant, and Lieutenants Davis and Manilal Barua had learnt the hard way of trial and error with the 1st Battalion, and they could now give invaluable assistance to the Commanding Officer in handling the special problems which would arise. Subedar Major Devi Sing Mech also worked quietly and diligently teaching his Viceroy's Commissioned Officers by the patience and perseverance of his own example.

Soon, the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment had grown to such a size that it threatened to overflow the accommodation allotted to it in Sidi Barrani Lines. It, therefore, became necessary to move B and D Companies, under Lieutenants J. D. Wade and C. N. Stonor, and Headquarter Company under Lieutenant Davis, up to the old camp at Elephant

Falls. This greatly complicated the administrative side of the unit, but at that time there was no other solution. Shillong was grossly over-crowded and accommodation was still being reserved for units of the Burma Army which were even then battling their way out of Burma.

Two months later, at the end of September, it was possible to concentrate the entire 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment and the skeleton headquarters of the Training Company at Elephant Falls. Here they shared camp with the 2nd Battalion, The Burma Regiment. This unit, under command of Lieutenant-Colonel D. N. Cooke had fought throughout the disastrous withdrawal from Burma. Its officers and men had lost everything they possessed in the process. In spite of lack of amenities and creature comforts, the Burma Regiment welcomed the 2nd Battalion with great kindness and warm hospitality.

In the new training grounds around the Falls and Shillong Peak, the 2nd Battalion was gradually knitted together, and training progressed vigorously and rapidly. The keenness of the men was terrific and was only equalled by the determination of the officers to overcome the difficulties of language by hurling themselves down regardless of bruises or torn clothing, in order to impart realism to the demonstration of a point in fieldcraft or weapon training. Posted around the camp were eight medium machine-guns for anti-aircraft protection — the pride of 2nd-Lieutenant W. Kelly, D.C.M., M.M., who to his great disappointment, was never called on to fire a shot in anger.

The training of the regimental officers was under the energetic direction of Major M. I. Majid, one of the Indian officers from the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, who had been posted as Second-in-Command. By this time, a motely group of young officers had joined 2nd Battalion amongst whom were 2nd-Lieutenants Kaphranga, Littlehales, Amar Sen, Maharaj Kumar Priya Brata Singh of Manipur, R. G. Fleeton and W. Kelly. He soon had his classes out on 'Tactical Exercises Without Troops', and also did his best to impart to those who wished the rudiments

of horsemanship. Several chargers had been the 2nd Battalion's legacy from the 3rd Battalion 8th Gorkha Rifles when they moved from Shillong, and to see Lieutenant Harkabahadur Rai going full tilt on one of them was a sight many old members of the 2nd Battalion will long remember. Certainly, there was a healthy lighter side to the more serious business of training which continued to weld the unit together and foster *esprit-de-corps* as the months quickly slipped past.

Early in 1943, hopes were high that the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment might soon be allowed to join the 1st Battalion on the Chindwin front, but in March these hopes were dashed with the arrival of orders for the unit to move at once to Ranipet in South India. It was a hard blow for the officers and men, who had trained so eagerly, to be moving away from the fighting front instead of towards it. However, India was then going through a difficult period in her internal security and the 2nd Battalion's task was to be a vital one.

In 1942, various provincial Congress ministries resigned from office and declared that they were unable to support the war effort unless the United Kingdom Government came forward immediately with definite proposals for the future status of India and recognized at the same time the ultimate need for granting to the people of the country the right of responsible government and self-determination. The Central Government decided to suppress the movement and troops were called out in aid of the civil power. Consequently, the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment was to move from Shillong to Madras to carry out railway protection duties. The choice of the unit could hardly be considered a happy one for the men. Their homes were directly threatened by the Japanese, whose advance into Assam seemed inevitable. The state of uncertainty in which they now lived, while engaged on railway protection duties under 105th Line of Communication Area, consequently led to much unhappiness and discontent at being so far from their homes and unable to strike a blow in their defence.

Ranipet is a small railway terminal on a branch line from Wallajahpat Road Station on the main Madras-Cochin route, some seventy-five miles away from Madras city by road. The camp area, which the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment now occupied, was one mile outside the town and on the bank of the Palar River, facing the historic Arcot-Fort on the opposite side. The greater part of the camp lay within a large toddy palm grove, the remainder was on the sandy bank of the Palar — a position which was found to be a burial ground. Although the accommodation was in tents and huts, the foliage of the palms overhead provided some relief from the burning rays of the sun during the hottest weather. Companies were sent out for months at a stretch to patrol the railway lines towards Madras, Bangalore and Bombay from fixed bases. While some platoons set out on foot from platoon and section posts alongside the railway lines, others would travel by train. Soon everyone got to know that part of India very well and saw how different it was from the greenness of Assam.

Platoons and Sections were seldom under the eye of an officer, yet the job was well done and the men conducted themselves with natural dignity. Those who remained behind in Battalion headquarters went on with the task of training and making daily improvements to the camp. These railway duties were tedious in the extreme and without excitement of any kind. The men would never have considered that such tasks compensated for their being denied what they thought was their rightful place on one of the fighting fronts.

Just when the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment had really settled down and resigned itself to the situation, an incident of great excitement did occur. Heavy rains had fallen during June, for the monsoon had arrived earlier that year than usual, and the Palar River, normally only a small trickle of water, suddenly became a swollen torrent of furious water carrying all before it. Two days before the real floods came, the river had been rising gradually. Nobody knew to what extent the river usually flooded its banks, but all were

perfectly sure that, if there was any danger, a military camp would never have been sited so near the river. The events that followed however proved this theory completely wrong.

It was with a feeling of uneasiness that officers and men went to bed on the night of 28 June and, in the early hours of the following morning, they awoke to find their worst fears confirmed. Many had the unpleasant experience of seeing by the dim light of dawn their kits slowly rising from the floor and beginning to float away. D Company, under Captain Stonor, was the worst hit for they occupied slightly lower lying ground than did the rest of the 2nd Battalion. The company area was soon flooded to a depth of more than a foot by the swirling muddy water. The men reacted to the situation by wading about in their underwear collecting and rescuing their belongings and then climbing up the palm trees to lash them securely to the tree trunks. Soon the skyline above D Company looked most odd and bulbous, but the solution proved most effective.

At daybreak working parties hurriedly tried to build dykes around the camp area, while the water continued to rise until it soon surrounded the camp on all sides. Lieutenant-Colonel Macleod was away from the unit at the time and Major M. I. Majid was left in his place to cope with this unexpected situation. He did so calmly and effectively and, ably aided by the Adjutant, now Captain J. E. Jenks, managed to collect all the men and the Battalion stores on high ground in the centre of the camp, the whole operation taking place to the accompaniment of much amusement and laughter.

Feeding and supplying the unit was the next big problem. They were completely cut off, but while Major-General G. Bruce, the Area Commander was contemplating dropping supplies to the 2nd Battalion by air, Captain Daly was busy building rafts on which to ferry essential stores from the nearby field supply depot. This he did once the first flood currents began to subside and the rafts could be made to negotiate the intervening apron of water. After several days of this damp and uncomfortable living, the returning

Commanding Officer was ferried back to this home port on a Battalion raft, looking rather like Sanders of the River.

The excitement over, life in the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment returned once more to normal. Routine patrol duties and company training helped to make the days pass a little more quickly, but no one enjoyed himself much. Complete boredom was the cause of many men getting into trouble and some came into conflict with local civilians and authorities. It was, therefore, a great relief when 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment handed over its irksome duties to the 3rd Battalion (The Nizam's Own) Hyderabad State Infantry in November, and moved nearer Bangalore to join 150th Indian Infantry Brigade at Bethmangala near the Kolar gold mines. The enthusiasm was so great that the Battalion marched under a gruelling sun, some two hundred miles from Ranipet in full marching order without a single man falling out of the column. Their enthusiasm had a strong reason. It was a revived hope for fulfilling their dearest ambition to relieve 1st Battalion on the Burma Front so as to prove their worth.

150th Indian Infantry Brigade, under Brigadier P.Lindsay, was a training brigade designed to prepare selected battalions in jungle fighting so that they could be used later to relieve the battle-weary units who might be withdrawn from Burma. Both the Brigadier and his able Second-in-Command, Colonel Wilson-Haffenden, were hard taskmasters. But under their care, the morale of the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment took a turn for the better and training really started in earnest. Strenuous days followed, but the men at least now had a definite goal to work for and once more hopes of relieving their 1st Battalion ran high and were eagerly discussed. Everyone did his utmost to attain as quickly as possible the very high standard of efficiency expected of him in the Brigade.

Apart from certain aspects of training the Brigade Commander soon realized that he and his staff could teach the men of the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment very little about jungle-craft and he, therefore, used the unit as his

demonstration battalion. This honour was greatly appreciated by all ranks and gave them a new pride in themselves, but they still had that hankering after real jungles and real enemy that would never be found in the State of Mysore.

Then the long awaited Japanese offensive came when they attacked in the Arakan. The fighting there was soon followed by the more widespread invasion of India through Manipur and the Naga Hills. Surely then the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment would now be called on to play its part and repel the invaders from Assam, just as the 1st Battalion had already been called on to move suddenly from Digboi to fill the gap on the unguarded flank east of Kohima. All ranks listened eagerly and anxiously to news of the fighting at Imphal and Kohima. The Adjutant searched the official mail each morning for the expected movement orders, but it was all in vain. While desperate fighting raged around Kohima and see-sawed across the Imphal plain, the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment remained in Mysore.

The strain placed on the men was almost unbearable and as news came through, that large parts of Assam had been overrun by the Japanese, a period of intense frustration followed. The men could not understand why they were being kept back in this way and many of them began to regret the day, and say so openly, that they volunteered for army service. It was a very natural reaction and it was a great pity that the Battalion's Commanding Officer did not make strong representations for the unit's participation on active service. There was no doubt that the 2nd Battalion was as fit as the 1st Battalion for active operations and such representations in the right quarters might have succeeded in tipping the scales in the unit's favour.

No move however took place. Instead, company training went on and was followed by interminable battalion exercises. The men learnt to march until they were completely exhausted and then to carry on despite that. They learnt at what angles a mule could kick and at which angles he could not. They did night exercises and river crossings and dug trenches until sick of the sight of a pick and shovel. In the jungles of

Pedduru every effort was made to make the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment fit for war. A Company and some officers were sent to Jungle Warfare Training School for training. Their capabilities so impressed the school authorities that they stopped taking any more men from the unit with the remark 'There is nothing that this school can teach the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment in Jungle-craft'.

The object was more than achieved, indeed it was perhaps all over done and a more imaginative approach might have been wiser. Very early on, in the 1st Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel Howman had realized the importance of relieving uninterrupted progressive training and reverting later to filling in the gaps. If the 2nd Battalion could have scrapped training and been given a crack at the Japanese, however small the operation might have been, it would soon have recovered its morale and enthusiasm.

As it was in June 1944, at the time the 1st Battalion was arriving back in Shillong after its baptism of fire and gallant action at Jessami and Kohima, the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment still seemed no nearer its goal of joining the Fourteenth Army. To many it seemed that a worthy Battalion was being wasted and that its spirit was being brought low through being overtrained without that prospect of active service which would make all their efforts justified in the eyes of both officers and men. Lieutenant-Colonel Brown paid a visit to the Battalion at this time. To all officers and men he brought the living proof that the Assam Regiment, young though it was, was as good as, if not better, than many other Regiments called upon to face the supreme tests of war. And around him thronged eager faces of hundreds of men with their officers who asked 'Sir, when will our Battalion go to war?' That opportunity never came.

With the departure from Shillong of the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment, the Training Company had once more emerged as a fully independent unit under command of Major Bhola Singh Lama. Very soon, however, General Headquarters decided on further expansion of the Regiment and sanctioned the coversion of the Training Company into

a fully fledged Training Battalion with an establishment of 1000 officers and men. This had been made possible by the magnificent response to the Regiment's recruiting drives, during which some hundreds of men from both plains and hills had been enlisted while hundreds more had had to be turned away. Only the best type of man was accepted and the enrolment quota was easily reached within a matter of a few weeks.

The 1st Battalion Assam Regiment, which had at the time just been withdrawn from 23rd Indian Infantry Division and moved to Digboi, was called on to supply a fresh cadre of officers and non-commissioned officer instructors for the new unit. Most notable amongst those who now arrived from Digboi were Captain R. H. Cronin, formerly Adjutant of the 1st Battalion and destined to take up similar duties in Shillong, and Subedar Kaliprasad Khatri, the new Subedar-Major designate.

As Commandant and Adjutant of an Indian Army Regimental Training Centre, Major Lama and Captain Cronin were soon expected to attend the annual Commandants' Conference at Delhi. This was no ordinary affair and indeed provided a galaxy of high ranking personalities. Nevertheless, our more junior representatives held their own and, taking courage in both hands, did not hesitate to raise their voices in the interest of the Regiment and point out the many serious handicaps under which the Training Battalion was expected to operate. General Headquarters proved to be most helpful and sympathetic, so that the two officers returned to Shillong full of confidence for the future.

Probably, one of the first results of this conference was the appointment on 26 September, 1943 of Lieutenant-Colonel C. H. Campbell as Commandant of the Training Battalion. Coming as he did from the 8th Gorkha Rifles, he brought with him first-hand knowledge of Assam and her people, for his former Regiment had had long association with the province. In the words of one of his officers—'Harry Campbell was a charming man, a first class soccer player and it was he who commenced to shape the Training Battalion

in the way it should go'. But this happy state of affairs was not to last very long. Lieutenant-Colonel Campbell had suffered greatly from ill-health while on active service and was really an invalid when posted to the Regiment. To the deep sorrow of all who had come into contact with him and worked for him, he died six short months later.

His place as Commandant was taken by Major Basil Connell-McDowell of the 5th Royal Gorkha Rifles. This was but a temporary measure until a permanent appointment could be made. Later, on 8 May, Lieutenant-Colonel H. E. Madge, transferred from the 4th Prince of Wales's Own Gorkha Rifles, was appointed as Commandant. Hubert Madge was an experienced soldier who had been recalled from retirement at the commencement of hostilities. His assumption of command coincided with the transition of the Training Battalion to form a fully independent Regimental Training Centre. His great administrative experience and ability were evident to all and he adopted his new Regiment with enthusiasm.

In the quiet, if unspectacular, way of any training centre, recruits continued to be trained and prepared with quite remarkable success. Earlier, at the instance of Lieutenant-Colonel Campbell and as an addition to the limited facilities available in Shillong, an arrangement had been made in late 1943 under which an auxiliary wing was set up for the Assam Regiment at the 38th Gorkha Regimental Training Centre at Saharanpur. There, under command of Lieutenant-Colonel C. W. Yeates, D.S.O., who was later to be appointed to command the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment, post-recruit training was carried out and specialist training of signallers and mortarmen could be started. It was a most satisfactory arrangement and, under Captain M. T. Procter, the wing prospered. Later, when reinforcements from Saharanpur reached the active battalions, it was found that they had indeed attained a commendably high standard.

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With the arrival in Shillong of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment from Kohima, all sections of the Regiment were outside active service areas. This did not last long however, and as it fell to the 1st Battalion once more to carry the torch of battle into Burma we must turn, as did the envious eyes of the unit's less fortunate sisters, to follow the succeeding adventures of that Battalion.

CHAPTER X

BACK TO BURMA

June 1944 — November 1944

THE 1st Battalion Assam Regiment remained in Shillong from 18 June to 5 September. This period, spent at the Elephant Falls tented camp, was devoted to rest and reorganization in preparation for an expected move back to some training area in India. It was fully hoped and believed that the 2nd Battalion would now come up to relieve the 1st Battalion and thus be given the chance it had awaited so long.

As many men as possible were sent on leave after special sanction had been obtained from Fourteenth Army. The Nagas, Assamese and Lushais had ready access to their homes. It was not possible to send off many of the Kukis whose villages lay in area still under dispute between the Allied and Japanese forces.

The Regimental Training Centre made strenuous efforts to provide some of the urgently required reinforcement personnel and indeed the best co-operation existed between the Centre and the Battalion. Several changes in the officer complement took place. Major Lowe left to take up command of the 2nd Battalion in place of Lieutenant-Colonel Macleod, who had been posted to a staff appointment in Delhi. His place as Second-in-Command was taken by Major Mohammed Ayub Khan, a senior Indian officer and graduate from Sandhurst who came to the Regiment from the 14th Punjab Regiment.

One of the most notable moments of this time was the moving parade held on 20 August, and attended by many important persons including the Army Commander, Lieutenant-General Sir William Slim,[1] when the Governor of

[1] See Appendix V

Assam presented the Indian Distinguished Service Medal to the aunt of Sepoy Wellington Massar. The 1st Battalion Assam Regiment fully mustered, presented a brave spectacle when drawn up on the parade ground in its setting of pine trees.

After making the presentation, Sir Andrew Clow addressed the gathering in these words :

'I have had the pleasure of meeting a number of you since you returned to Shillong, but this is the first occasion on which the public and I have the opportunity of seeing you on parade since your heroic achievements in the Naga Hills. I would like to express, on behalf of the people of Assam, our pride in the heroism you displayed and our gratitude for the part you took in defending the province from the horrors of invasion and the contribution you made to the crushing defeat of the Japanese. Although your Regiment had not previously been in battle, you have in the words of one of our leading generals, placed yourselves on the fighting scrolls of India and well towards the top. I feel sure that in any further opportunity that may be given to you of meeting our enemies, you will maintain the splendid standard you have set in your first campaign.

We have met this morning specially to honour the memory of a distinguished soldier of the Regiment, who belonged to these Hills. You have heard read the citation of the great acts of gallantry by which he has earned the decoration which I have presented to his aunt. It is perhaps not known to all here that, before he entered the public service, he was one of the five Khasis who volunteered to submit himself for possible infection by Kala Azar and contracted the disease. The result of this experiment was to establish scientifically the method of transmission of the disease which has proved such a scourge in Assam and thus provide material assistance in the campaign against it.

He has passed on to further service. While we mourn the loss of so brave a soldier and would express our sympathy with his relatives, we feel proud of his achieve-

ment and of the example which he has set to both soldiers and civilians in Assam.'

Movement orders were received on 1 September. With complete surprise the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment heard that it was to move back to Kohima in the first instance and later to go to Imphal to resume an active operational role under command of 268th Indian Infantry Brigade. These orders killed all hopes of the 2nd Battalion, for the small Training Centre would not be able to support two battalions in the field. The move, to some extent, was also received with disappointment by the 1st Battalion, who, after its great achievements in the Naga Hills, had hoped to be able to train and reform under proper conditions in order to return to battle fit in all respects and continue the high standard it had already set itself.

The first phase of the move took the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment to milestone 32 on the Imphal road, but a week later the unit was on the move again. When Kohima was reached, it could be seen that the people there were already rebuilding their homes and removing some of the ravages of the battle. In the village, a new bustle of activity was taking place and the sound of laughing children could be heard. On Summerhouse Hill indomitable Nature was stirring, small green shoots were appearing on the battered and torn trees. Memories were vividly recalled as the motor convoy swept past the ruined Deputy Commissioner's bungalow, Jail Hill and below GPT Ridge, but the convoy did not stop and Kohima was soon left behind.

Next came Imphal and, beyond, Moreh in the Kabaw Valley. Many changes had taken place since 1942 when the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment had known the area so well. Again more memories were aroused as the 'Saddle', 'Malta' and 'Gibraltar' were reached and the Battalion travelled for the first time along a new metalled road linking Palel with Tamu. By 22 September the Battalion had assembled at Moreh, but not without some difficulty, for the road deteriorated rapidly beyond the Lokchao River. Heavy

rains and vehicular traffic had churned the surface into a sea of mud and wire-mesh laid out by the engineers had been driven deep below a foot or more of glutinous evil smelling mud and rotting vegetation.

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Since 1st Battalion Assam Regiment had withdrawn from the counter-offensive against the intruding Japanese divisions, much had taken place on the Burma front. Now that the Battalion again takes its place in the Order of Battle, a review of the past months can be briefly given.

When 31st Japanese Division was forced to withdraw from Kohima and XXXIII Corps had linked up with IV Corps, it was expected that the Japanese would regroup their forces east of Imphal at Ukhrul. From that area, a co-ordinated offensive movement, with formations operating from Tamu, could be mounted with the ultimate object of capturing Imphal itself. However, the Japanese were to show a remarkable lack of resiliency and failed to switch their attack from lines along which their invasion of India had originally been conceived. Their fatal error at Kohima and slavish adherence to their original plans now ensured their defeat. Fourteenth Army launched its own attack on Ukhrul and also moved against 33rd Japanese Division in the vicinity of Palel and Bishenpur.

By mid-June, it was clear that the Grand Design, on which the Japanese had staked so much, had failed and the defeat of the 15th Japanese Army was resulting in a disorderly withdrawal under extreme monsoon conditions, a contingency for which the Japanese had made no allowance. The tables had been completely turned and the besieged now had everything while the besiegers had no reserves, food, medical services or transport. Having gambled all, they were about to lose all.

A Japanese diplomat and former member of the Japanese Foreign Office, Toshikazu Kase, writing later of this period gives the following description of the Imphal fighting:

'On September 27, 1944, our expeditionary force of 270,000 men which had marched to the gates of Imphal in Manipur, India, met defeat. Most of the force perished in battle or later of starvation. The disaster of Imphal was perhaps the worst of its kind yet chronicled in the annals of war. One of the Regimental Commanders, who survived the retreat, called on me in Tokyo in his tattered uniform. I could hardly recognize him. He told me how the ranks had thinned daily as thirst and hunger overtook the retreating column, and how the sick and wounded had to be abandoned by hundreds. In order to avoid capture these men were usually forced to seek death at their own hands. Only 70,000 of the original force survived.'

Allied strategy now demanded that there should be no relaxation in the counter-offensive — the routed Japanese forces were to be annihilated west of the Chindwin and all escape routes cut where possible. The monsoon was on its way, and it would be turning a new page in military history if either side campaigned through the rain-sodden and malaria-ridden months ahead. Yet, this was exactly what the Fourteenth Army planned to do, knowing fully well that the decision would place a heavy strain on our administrative services as well as on the troops in the field.

Air supply became the principal weapon for maintaining the relentless momentum of the advance. Although troops drew further and further away from base air fields and operated more and more in country where no landing strips could be prepared, vast quantities of stores and ammunition were delivered promptly and with wonderful efficiency to forward units.

During July, IV Corps continued to advance down the Tiddim road in spite of destroyed bridges, mines and booby-traps. The Japanese continued to stage counter-attacks, but although they hit back sharply on occasions, their powers of resistance gradually decreased and their morale suffered a terrible decline. During the previous two years of war in South East Asia, practically no prisoners had been

taken. Now there was a steady flow of captured soldiers towards the cages and interrogating centres. On 4 August, a brigade of 2nd Division entered Tamu to find indescribable confusion. The enemy had left behind his wounded, sick and dying. Unburied corpses lay amongst abandoned guns, tanks and vehicles.

During August, the Ukhrul area was completely cleared and 11th East African Division took over on the Tamu Front from 23rd Indian Infantry Division. This division continued to make progress southwards down the Kabaw Valley and eastwards to Sittaung throughout September in spite of appalling weather and difficult terrain. Sittaung was captured on 4 September and then the impetus of the East African advance swung entirely to the south.

Rear areas were now taken over by 268th Brigade, consisting of three Indian battalions and two Nepalese State Force contingents. This was the force to which the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was attached when it took up position at Moreh on 23 September.

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The area occupied by the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment lay on the last portion of high ground before the Kabaw Valley proper was reached. All around the position was a tangled mass of scrubby vegetation and teak trees, while littered about the area were burnt-out tanks and vehicles. Rocks and tall elephant grass gave the position at first sight a formidable appearance, but the men soon made an impression on this wilderness and transformed the jungle into a reasonable camp site. Certainly, if any comfort existed in this 'Valley of Death' or 'Green Hell' as the Kabaw Valley was popularly called, the men of the Regiment could be relied on to find and produce it. The Brigade Commander, Brigadier G. M. Dyer, D.S.O., O.B.E., was much impressed with the almost barrack square smartness of the camp when he visited the unit a few days after the Battalion's arrival in the area.

Tamu and Moreh at this time were rearward areas but dangers were always present in the Kabaw Valley. It was said to be one of the most highly malarial places in the world, and the scrub-typhus mite was also a potential source of serious casualties. Only good hygiene discipline could effectively combat these dangers to health and, when combined with mepacrine prophylactic treatment for malaria, this discipline to which the men were quick to respond kept our casualties surprisingly low. There was no repetition this time of the earlier Chindwin period's sick rate.

Apart from dangers to health, there were dangers to the body in the shape of undefined minefields, which had been laid down by 20th Division in the first place when it withdrew the previous March and supplemented in turn by the Japanese before vacating the area. Once again, Captain Corlett gave evidence of his almost uncanny knack of 'getting away with it' when he took out a party to cut thatch in the area adjoining the Battalion's position. Numerous round metal objects were discovered by the men and only then did they realize that they had penetrated a minefield. Unharmed they crept off to seek building material elsewhere!

Still in an incomplete state of refitting and training, every man of the unit had much to learn before being considered a proficient soldier. Training was started again, but active operations and basic training cannot easily be carried out in the field at the same time. In this case, offensive commitments had to come first. The area at the head of the Kabaw Valley was still open to isolated parties of the enemy trying to escape from the Naga Hills, while an attack on the Tamu airfield was always a possibility. Patrols from 1st Battalion Assam Regiment, therefore, fanned out northwards along the Mintha track and training became seriously interrupted.

The pitiful condition of the roads at this stage was characterized by the Mintha track. Every chaung had overflowed and inundated extensive areas of country through which the track wound. Japanese transport lay abandoned in large quantities embedded to their axles in mud and impossible to recover. In some cases, Japanese

corpses lay in these vehicles and many more bodies were found in small jungle camps, a grim pointer to the lack of medical facilities and starvation in the Japanese army. Here again there was a conspicuous absence of nature's scavengers and, as at the time of the tragic flight of refugee columns from Burma in 1942, so it now seemed that death on this enormous scale had repulsed even the jackals and birds of prey.

Improvization was the key note in road-making and the usual method of bridging swampy land was to lay out lengths of timber transversely, securing these at the sides by heavier timber. When first laid down this method was most effective, though bumpy, but after a few days use the surface became extremely slippery and hazardous; when vehicles crossed them bulks of timbers would rear out of the bog like crocodiles, pervading the air with the bad smell of rotting vegetation. When the surface of the road failed completely, vehicles would wheel off the track into the scrub undergrowth and batter out a rough diversion. Again, where such diversions were not possible, vehicles would be winched forward yard by yard, from tree to tree, until firmer ground was reached. Somehow, the Battalion's vehicles always got to their destination and returned safely. Under almost impossible conditions, Lieutenant T. R. Littlewood, the Transport Officer, and Havildar Haristan contrived to keep the serviceability of the Battalion's transport at a very high level.

On 2 October, the deployment of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment began when C Company, under Major Sidhiman Rai, moved south of Tamu to take over positions from an East African company at Indaing, guarding the approach to Tamu from the South, across the Yu River. Then, at first light, on 4 October, Captain Corlett marched out with D Company along the Mintha track, after orders had been received from Brigade Headquarters for the Battalion to despatch a strong patrol to Thaungdut on the Chindwin and carry out reconnaissance patrolling on the east bank of the river. Sufficient supplies were carried for the journey

to the river only and from then onwards food and ammunition would, through necessity, be by air. With D Company went Lieutenant Straw, the Intelligence Officer, who was to assist in showing the flag at Thaungdut and in the collation of information.

As our forces moved back into Burmese territory, a liberal policy towards the people of Burma had been laid down, for the reoccupation of the country. It was, however, important to make some display of force to satisfy the inhabitants of some of the larger river villages that the Allied forces had established supremacy over the Japanese, with whom the villagers had freely collaborated in the past, and to point out that any re-occurrence of the hostility experienced during the exodus of 1942 would not be tolerated. The guiding principles to be observed by all troops were that no person should suffer on account of political opinions honestly held, even if these were anti-British, but action might be taken on account of proven crimes against criminal law or when repugnant to humanity.

After three days marching D Company reached the Chindwin at Taungbola some six miles north of Thaungdut. There they received their first air-dropped rations on 8 October, after the Quartermaster, Captain Lloyd Jones, had personally supervised at Imphal the packing of the stores and other special items required by D Company for the thrust across the river. The Quartermaster accompanied the Dakota, much to the delight of his orderly, Sepoy Biakhlira, who was allowed to go on this jaunt and help in throwing out the packages, some attached to parachutes and others, such as sacks of rice and salt, dropped 'free'. In addition to food and ammunition, mail and newspapers were dropped and also a bag of silver rupees with which the company could trade and purchase information. This was the first occasion on which the Battalion had had to organize an air-drop and mark out the dropping zone, but the operation proved completely successful and a useful practice in procedure which was later to become a routine part of the Battalion's existence.

On 9 October, Lieutenant Straw with one platoon made a surprise arrival at Thaungdut in country river craft. He learnt from the village headmen that no Japanese were known to be in the area and our troops were received by the villagers without any show of hostility. Meanwhile, the remainder of the company crossed the river at Taungbola and began an extensive reconnaissance of the east bank. In most cases, the villagers reported that the Japanese had not been seen for upwards of five weeks, but on one occasion a patrol commanded by Subedar Khagendra Nath Gogoi clashed with a Japanese foraging party in the small village of Auktaung. Three of the Japanese were killed and two others wounded. Lance Naik Thanthuama Lushai of the patrol was unfortunately killed and another sepoy was wounded.

While the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was thus employed, it received a liaison visit from Lieutenant-Colonel Madge, the Regimental Centre Commandant. With this energetic and capable officer, the close ties already established during the period spent in Shillong were further strengthened. When he returned to Shillong, it was with a sympathetic understanding of the Battalion's peculiar difficulties and requirements. Important also was the impression he took back with him of the men of his newly adopted Regiment under field conditions.

As the month of October drew to a close, orders were received to recall all detachments to Moreh. The Battalion then heard with some excitement that it was to move in support of the East Africans in their drive on to Mawlaik.

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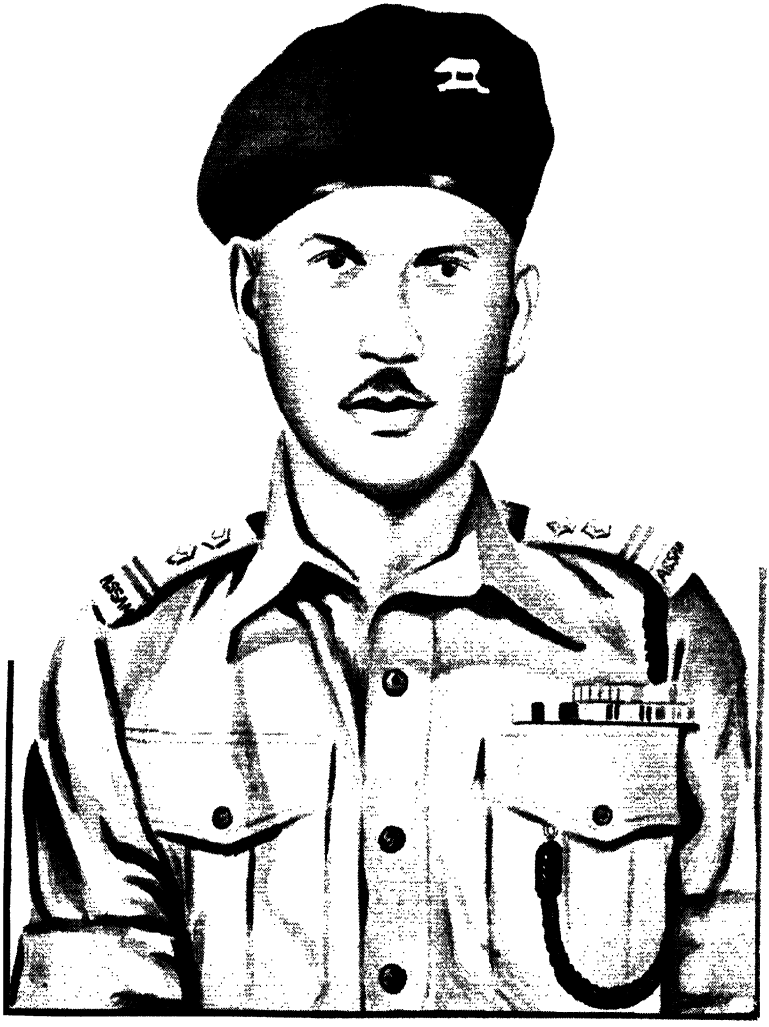
11th East African Infantry Division, under Major-General C. C. Fowkes, C.B.E., D.S.O., O.B.E., had by the end of October made substantial progress towards Kalemyo. One of its brigades had wheeled off the main line of advance to strike eastwards from Htinzin, about 30 miles south of Tamu, in order to capture Mawlaik, an isolated river port between



SUBEDAR (LATER SUBEDAR-MAJOR) KILAGENDRA NATH GOGOI M.C. *[Facing page 156*

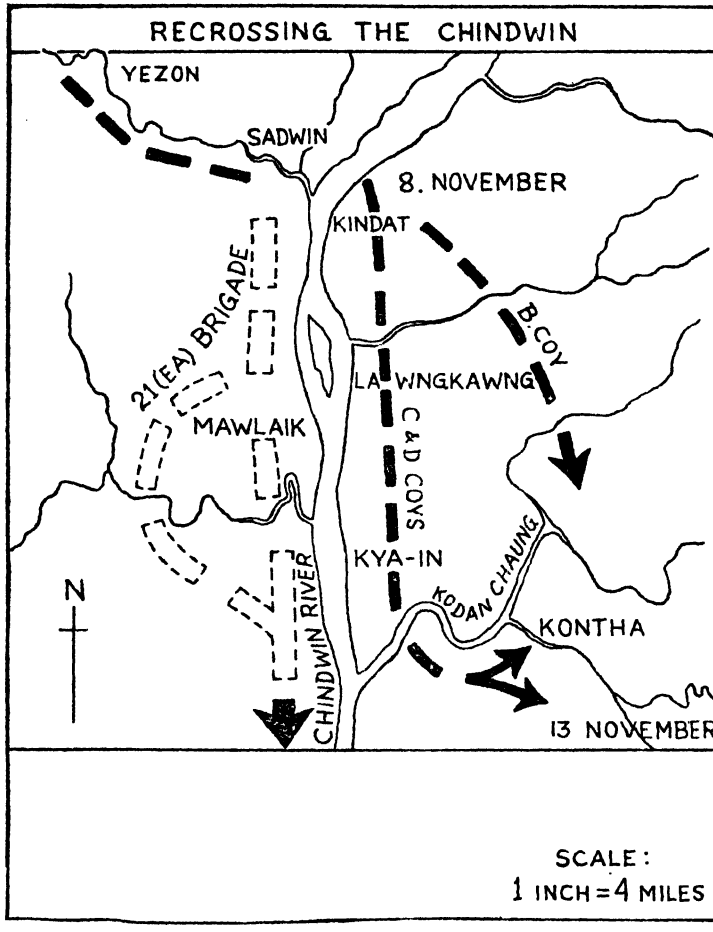
Sittaung and Kalewa. This Brigade, 21st Infantry Brigade under Brigadier J. F. MacNab, D.S.O., O.B.E., had however been checked many times in the hilly area between the Kabaw Valley and the Chindwin and had, as a result, made very slow progress. At the time the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was ordered to move in its support, the Brigade had been held up by a feature known as Leik Hill, which lay astride the only track leading eastwards. It was intended that the 1st Battalion should infiltrate behind this Japanese bunker and encircle it from the east.

On 30 October, the Battalion set out along the Tamu-Kalemyo road. The march took place at night to avoid interfering with supply convoys and this, combined with the terrible conditions of the road, slowed up the march considerably. Htinzin was reached during the second night and the unit camped on the banks of a large river near the village of Teinkaya, where a rear base had already been set up by Lieutenant Littlewood. Here they heard that Leik Hill had fallen and the Battalion was to move forward to Sadwin on the Chindwin, around which the East Africans were then fighting.

Leaving the Nam-palaw River at Teinkaya, the Battalion moved along the sunken road which wound sharply upwards to a ridge of over 2500 feet above sea-level. The route was so over-hung with dense jungle that no sunlight could penetrate the foliage and the track had remained a veritable quagmire ever since the monsoon rains. Slopes were steep and sudden and the mules had to be unloaded and encouraged to become rock-climbers. Endless delays ensued when some lost their footing and crashed down the hillside. Permanent casualties were few. By the end of the day, only one mule was unfit to carry a full load. Only four miles of the route had been covered and the march had taken eight hours.

For two more days the Battalion struggled along the narrow hedged-in track. Leik Hill, bare and denuded of its trees and jungle, was passed and then the track gradually dropped down to the Chindwin. On the afternoon of the third

day out, Sadwin was reached and the men could clean themselves, get rid of the hundreds of small disgusting bush ticks they had picked up and make camp near to Brigade Headquarters.



The Commanding Officer, who had gone on ahead of the main column from Teinkaya with his advance party, was ready to explain the next phase of the Battalion's

operations at Sadwin. The unit was to cross the Chindwin at the earliest possible moment and then advance southwards, keeping parallel with the East Africans moving down the west bank of the river.

So the first assault on the Chindwin line was to be staged and the honour of conducting the operation fell to the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment. This meant that this Battalion was to be the first complete battalion to recross the Chindwin during the reconquest of Burma.

Preparations for the descent on Kindat, the small river township immediately opposite to Sadwin, were put in hand. The river at this point was more than 1200 yards wide, its current was swift and treacherous. What might well prove to be a major opposed river-crossing was to be carried out but with none of the weapons and support normally associated with such undertakings. Detailed reconnaissance of the east bank was essential and this was done by Lieutenant Straw with one section under command, using country dugouts under the cover of darkness. Quietly they paddled along the east bank looking for suitable landing places and one small party went ashore to investigate the village itself.

All was quiet around Kindat, but the Japanese prepared defence positions were in profusion, in good repair and could no doubt be occupied at short notice. Further delay was therefore to be avoided. The date of the crossing was set for 7 November. This gave the Battalion three more days to complete its preparations, find country boats and make rafts. Also, by that time, it was hoped that the East Africans would have succeeded in eliminating the Japanese occupying the heights above Sadwin from which they were able to dominate all suitable crossing points on the west bank.

A small creek up-river provided cover and sanctuary for the fleet of boats and rafts now being assembled. This was a time of great activity with little opportunity for relaxation. Then men were busy from dawn to dusk cutting bamboos, bundling up river reeds and grass, lashing them

together until ready to be covered with tarpaulins and the rafts thus took shape. They were ungainly and cumbersome contraptions, but capable of holding twelve men and their equipment, and guaranteed — everyone hoped so at least — to stay afloat long enough to get to the other side of the river.

During the morning of 7 November the men stopped work to watch the first of the American piloted L-5 aircraft touch down on the landing strip at Sadwin. Soon, stretcher cases were being evacuated and the small planes were coming and going at regular intervals. The gallant pilots, who brought their machines down in a space of little more than a hundred yards and took off again with nothing to spare over the tree tops, worked from first light to dusk during the days that followed. Their untiring cheerfulness was a great inspiration to all who watched them, particularly when it was realized that they were flying unarmed aircraft in areas subject to Japanese air activity.

Later that same day, when night had fallen, one platoon, under Subedar Tongkhotang Kuki, climbed into their unsteady country boats and pushed off silently across the swirling dark waters of the Chindwin. Forty minutes later they beached on the bank above Kindat and made their way quickly into the township to take up position to receive the remainder of the company on the following day. There was still no indication that the Japanese were in the vicinity.

So far all had gone extremely well. Optimism was so high that Lieutenant-Colonel Brown decided that it was unnecessary to wait again for darkness to cover the battalion's operations. C Company was, therefore, ordered to cross to Kindat in full daylight the next morning. Again the Japanese showed no reaction and the company was in position by midday. Two platoons were then pushed southwards to the village of Lawngkawng where Japanese movement had been observed by the East Africans now in occupation of the Sadwin heights. The fighting patrols crept up to the village and took up assault positions. No sooner were they in position than a Japanese fighting patrol

of about fifteen men came into sight. A sharp skirmish followed but the Japanese had been taken by surprise and six of them were killed before their patrol could make off into the jungle. The C Company patrols suffered no casualties. Lawngkawng itself was deserted and the patrols withdrew back to the bridgehead area at Kindat.

By the 11 November the entire battalion had crossed in a variety of river craft, the mules swimming alongside, and was established on the east bank. The Kindat operation was thus successfully concluded, the keynote had been on improvization which, when coupled with audacity, had produced results beyond all expectations.

B and D Companies now moved through C Company's positions around Kindat and struck southwards. A Company assumed responsibility for the protection of Battalion Headquarters, releasing C Company for other activity. A leap-frog movement was carried out along the river bank by C and D companies, while Major Calistan with B Company, went off to search for the Japanese further inland. Nothing was seen of the Japanese but information from villagers in the area indicated that they were near. It appeared that many had crossed over from the west bank but they managed to keep ahead of the Battalion's leading elements. After the first few days of fruitless patrolling, the Battalion's advance was considerably speeded up in an effort to come to grips with the Japanese.

All supplies were now being received by air; forward dropping zones had to be nominated before actually being reached and their suitability therefore depended on a certain amount of guess work. Another difficulty was that the companies were constantly moving at short notice. Nevertheless, the Quartermaster's department contrived to keep them supplied throughout this fast moving campaign.

On 13 November, Captain Steyn, in temporary command of D Company, took up the leading position of the advance at Kontha and there received evidence that about 300 Japanese were concentrated at a village some six miles further south. C and D Companies were immediately

ordered to carry out a joint action against the village at first light on the following morning. This operation did not, however, materialize and all further advances south were suspended upon orders from Brigade Headquarter, for the Battalion to return to the west bank. Later, during the day it was thought that the Battalion had caught up with the Japanese when heavy firing broke out in the direction of B Company. But it was discovered that B Company had got bored with inaction and decided to make an 'opposed river crossing' over a nearby chaung. The Commanding Officer was not amused!

The Battalion was now ordered to concentrate at Kya-in, recross the Chindwin and regroup at Mawlaik. After the initial work done on the east bank, and the imminent prospect of contacting the retreating Japanese again, these were disappointing orders. However, other plans were in hand for the future employment of the Battalion and these necessitated a spell at Mawlaik as the first phase of a return to Moreh. On 15 November, therefore, positions were handed over to a Battalion of the 5th King's African Rifles, together with all surplus rations and ammunition.

The following day the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment less D Company and the Mule Platoon, crossed the river in country boats. Those remaining behind helped to weave grass mats to assist the mules to negotiate a large sand-bar immediately opposite Mawlaik. The animals were then to swim the river accompanied by their drivers. This was a tricky operation, for the river at its narrowest was about 700 yards wide and there was a considerable downstream drag in the swiftly flowing current.

The mules set off with their drivers holding on to their tails and all but four managed to get across safely. These four animals were swept aboard the skeleton of an old river steamer and became entangled with the wreckage. Their drivers would countenance no proposals to shoot the poor beasts as they thrashed amidst the twisted steel girders and planking in efforts to free themselves. With great skill and infinite patience the four animals were first calmed and then

lifted bodily off the steamer. They were then pulled clear of the wreckage and made the bank safely, though severely lacerated about the legs. Several non-combatants of the Administrative Company played a notable part in this small episode, which was not without considerable personal risk from the swift current and flailing hooves.

While at Mawlaik, 1st Battalion Assam Regiment came under the administrative command of 20th Indian Infantry Division and was now told its future. After a short rest at Mawlaik, the Battalion was to march back to Moreh and there join 19th Indian Infantry Division — the Dagger Division — as its Reconnaissance Battalion. It certainly looked as though the 1st Battalion was destined to be mixed up in the thick of the Fourteenth Army's offensive after all.

CHAPTER XI

MAWLAIK TO MANDALAY

1 December 1944 — 21 March 1945

IN NOVEMBER some reorganization of the forces along India's eastern frontier took place and Fourteenth Army was reduced to only IV Corps and XXXIII Corps — XV Corps in the Arakan operated, as a result, in an independent role directly under the command of 11th Army Group. 19th Indian Infantry Division, commanded by Major-General T. W. Rees, C.B., C.I.E., D.S.O., M.C., which had been stationed in India since it was raised there in 1941, arrived to join IV Corps in its task of pursuing the withdrawing Japanese. One of its brigades (98th) crossed the Chindwin at Sittaung on 19 November to reconnoitre routes eastwards from the river to the Railway Corridor of Upper Burma. When it confirmed that the routes were feasible, the whole of 19th Indian Infantry Division was directed to the same front and the remaining two brigades (62nd and 64th) were on their way across the river by the end of the month.

Meanwhile, 11th East African Division captured Kalewa on 2 December, and, after a bridge-head had been established on the east bank, engineers of XXXIII Corps constructed a Bailey pontoon bridge of over one thousand feet in length to span the Chindwin.

To the north at Mawlaik, a brigade of 20th Indian Infantry Division crossed the river on 3 December and struck eastwards through difficult country. The remainder of this Division crossed at Kalewa and the bridge-head area there was further extended with the arrival of 2nd British Division from Imphal to relieve 11th East African Division, which was now withdrawn to India.

The Fourteenth Army Commander, with six divisions and an additional two tank and two infantry brigades at

his disposal, planned to fight the main strength of the Japanese Burma Area Army, consisting of five and one-third divisions, one independent mixed brigade, one tank regiment, plus about 40,000 lines of communication troops, on the Shwebo plain, north of the loop of the Irrawaddy which runs from east to west between Mandalay and Pakokku.

Throughout December, the leading formations met and overcame stubborn resistance, but on the last day of the year the capture of Kadum by elements of XXXIII Corps gave the Allied forces a firm footing in the plain.

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With the return of 1st Battalion Assam Regiment to Morch on 1 December, the period of passing from one formation to another came to an end. Since the beginning of the year, the unit had spent periods of a few months, weeks or even days with: 253rd Sub Area, 50th Indian Parachute Brigade, 202nd Area, 33rd Brigade of 7th Indian Infantry Division, both 4th Brigade and 6th Brigade of 2nd British Infantry Division, 251st (Shillong) Sub Area, 268th Indian Infantry Brigade, 11th East African Division and finally six days under 20th Indian Infantry Division at Mawlaik.

This impressive list carried with it all the attendant problems of equipment and supply which dogged the Battalion for so long. The abnormal amount of movement and change of command and district created near chaos administratively and caused serious difficulties on the quartermastering side. Indents to cover deficiencies were lodged with each successive formation, but very few of the stores were ever received in any quantity, for the obvious reason that the Battalion's temporary hosts were disinclined to play fairy-godmother.

In many cases, the shortages were considerable and most serious. The Mortar Platoon could bring into action only one of its full establishment of three sections, though the platoon's personnel could rejoice in the possession of all

six baseplates. Controlled stores of all description were impossible to procure at this stage and the battalion was dangerously lacking in Bren and Sten-guns.

The role assigned to the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment, when it came under command of 19th Indian Infantry Division, that of Reconnaissance Battalion, presupposed that the unit was fit to assume the function. Without doubt, the Battalion had been selected because of its achievements during the preceding months and its proved adaptability to jungle warfare conditions. But, whereas the division was complete in every detail and fresh from the training grounds of Nasik, the Battalion was an ill-equipped unit, having been denied time and facilities for training after the Kohima campaign.

The absence of vital equipment and personnel doomed the unit never to fulfil its new role. The Quartermaster writing of this period said :

> 'I shall never forget those hurried consultations with Divisional Headquarters — appalled at our deficiencies, too busy to help us much with supplies or, above all, with transport. General Rees had started his rush and the devil take the hindmost'.

It may be that the Divisional Commander was never informed of this sorry state of affairs, or knowing of it, felt unable to alter the position at that late stage. Two months later, when the situation became all too apparent, drastic changes had to be made.

The division had already started on its way along the old 'Chindit' trail and only Divisional Headquarters remained to cross the Chindwin. Coming as it did from another theatre of operations, the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was a long way behind and was a late starter when it moved out of Moreh on 7 December down the Mintha track to Thanan. Here it stayed the night before crossing the Minthami Taungdan to Tonhe and thence moved to the bridge-head ferry area at Nanthanyit, a few miles north of Thaungdut. The Battalion was more than ever incom-

plete for the Signal Platoon had been left behind at Moreh under Captain Wood, with sixty additional potential signallers, with orders to be ready to rejoin the unit somewhere in Burma after six weeks of high pressure training.

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Passing through the remarkably well organized divisional bridge-head, the Battalion established itself without incident in the first of many temporary camps three miles east of the river. It seemed strange and unreal that the same areas, in which the Battalion had patrolled dangerously in the past, should now be safe and quiet, well behind the front line.

Soon the unit was marching with all possible speed in an effort to make good the many miles separating it from the fighting front. Divisional transport was rigidly restricted to essential stores only and no assistance could be expected from that quarter. So, personal kits were dumped and the men went on with only what small amount of clothing and bedding they were able to carry in their packs. From the river camp, the route led eastwards, the hamlets of Le-U, Kya-in and Wetkauk being briefly occupied and then abandoned. Mischance caused the first fatal accident of the march when at Le-U, the Battalion Headquarters orderlies made a fire above a Japanese shell which had sunk into the soft earth during the monsoon. The resultant explosion, which shook the whole camp, killed Sepoy Rohnuna Lushai and most severely wounded his comrade, Sepoy Thanglinga Lushai.

From Wetkauk the trail left the marshy river valley and entered hilly country as it wound through the dense mixed jungle of the Namtainggwin Reserved Forest. The narrow meandering road, rising to two thousand feet, had first been used by Wingate's 'Chindit' columns in 1943 and then improved and rebuilt in places by the Japanese to assist their attempted invasion of India during the previous spring. The rough milestones, with their Japanese characters, slipped quickly past as the Battalion moved from one air-

dropping zone to another, making for Pinbon across the forest tract. At each dropping zone, fresh supplies were obtained and, although it had become necessary to reduce the normal scale of rations to some extent, no one experienced hardship because of it. The impression gained by the Burmese civil population must have been of a well equipped and highly trained army seeking to conquer, and, above all, to stay.

Although the Japanese divisions had been severely mauled in the campaign against Imphal and Kohima, their withdrawal, when conducted on the east bank of the Chindwin, was well planned and never became a route. Dogged though the Japanese were by sickness and starvation, their resistance, when encountered, was determined. Their forces were never allowed to become isolated and annihilated; instead they established themselves in a series of excellently sited delaying points, from which they withdrew skilfully once they considered that the position no longer held up the attacking forces. There appeared, however, to be two main considerations which the Japanese commanders failed to appreciate: firstly, the ability of the Allied troops to cover great distances over difficult country in short spaces of time without the need of long rest periods; and secondly, the ability of Army Command to supply those troops by air and keep pace with the rapidity of the advance. Air supply certainly became the deciding factor in the reconquest of Burma.

The division maintained steady progress, capturing Pinlebu and Banmauk on 16 December, and Wuntho on 19 December, thus entering the Railway Corridor to attack and take the second railway town of Kawlin on 20 December.

By 21 December the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment, less Headquarter Company, had concentrated at Pinbon. The missing company was bringing up the rear, two marches behind. While the troops rested and cleaned themselves up during the next three days, members of the Transport Platoon busily investigated the mechanical worthiness of the many abandoned Japanese vehicles which littered the surrounding jungle. Havildar Haristan became the proud

possessor of a fine Mercedes saloon car, but his dreams of riding in style to Mandalay were shattered when, to his chagrin, he was relieved of his prize by a divisional recovery unit.

Christmas Eve found the Battalion camped about the small village of Napin a few miles south of Pinbon. Major E. P. Marsden now commanded the main column as both the Commanding Officer and the Second-in-Command were forward in contact with Divisional Headquarters, preparing for the time when the Battalion would assume its proper role of Reconnaissance Battalion. Weariness and rough living failed to dampen the traditional Christmas spirit and that evening large wood fires illuminated the camp to warm the singers as they gathered together. Jollity was further enhanced by a liberal ration of rum to accompany the best that the regimental cooks could devise from de-hydrated goat and vegetables, which were the inevitable consequence of air supply.

On 26 December at Sakhan the Battalion caught its first prisoner of war, but was disappointed when the man turned out to be only a demented Korean coolie. However, the chase was on and two days later, Captain Corlett took out a patrol from Pinlebu to investigate a report that some personnel of the Japanese military police units (the Kempei Tai) were hiding in a village nearby. In the dark and confusion which accompanied the patrol's advent in the village, one of the Japanese was killed and another wounded, but unfortunately a Burmese civilian who was aiding the patrol as a guide was also killed.

From Pinlebu the route of advance took the Battalion southwards through Alezu to Kawlin. The gap between the stragglers and the main forces was now appreciably narrowing until, on the afternoon of 1 January, almost one month after starting out from Moreh, the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment linked up with Division Headquarters at Thityabin. Here they learnt that the first serious opposition holding up the leading elements had just been eliminated at Leiktu, about six miles further down the road.

* * * *

The Japanese position at Leiktu had been well sited. Extensive field works and anti-tank obstacles in the well-wooded area had allowed two hundred of the Japanese successfully to hold up the whole of the 98th Indian Infantry Brigade from 26 December to 1 January, as it sought to advance on Kanbalu to the south. This action illustrated that there was still plenty of fight left in the Japanese. But once Leiktu had been occupied, there were signs that their situation had much deteriorated and that their strong delaying action might possibly become a retreat if sufficiently hard pressed.

Major-General Rees had, therefore, every intention of following up fast and hard, and from Thityabin the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was ordered to move on as quickly as possible through Kanbalu and establish itself at Tangon, a small railway village about eight miles further south. For some time, the Battalion was thus to lead the division when it began its cold midnight march along a road strewn with road-blocks in the form of fallen trees and brushwood. Absolute silence was to be maintained and strict instructions were given for the disposal of the numerous chickens which the men invariably carried with them. The anger of the Commanding Officer can, therefore, be imagined when he unexpectedly sat on a large black cockerel in the Transport Officer's jeep during a halt at one of the road-blocks. The offending bird rent the night with its shrieks while the Commanding Officer became purple with indignation!

Proceeding on cautiously, the Battalion passed through five more road-blocks before it reached Tangon to find the village deserted of Japanese. As a defensive base was prepared for the arrival of Divisional Headquarters and 98th Indian Infantry Brigade, the Quartermaster and Transport Officer began clearing the road-blocks in the rear. These operations disclosed that several areas had been littered with anti-personnel mines and booby traps. It was amazing that the marching columns had been able to pass through without suffering a single casualty. The transport

convoy was not so fortunate, for at one point, where the road entered a dry stream bed the third truck in line blew up on a mine. The damage was, however, not beyond repair and no one was seriously injured.

19th Indian Infantry Division was by now rapidly converging on a point which would soon bring it into contact with 2nd British Infantry Division, who were driving eastwards from the Chindwin to Ye-U in the Shwebo plain. It was expected that, as a result of this conjunction of forces, a number of the Japanese would be caught in the intervening triangle. Plans for their interception and destruction were laid and on the night of 3 January, 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was ordered to move westwards in two separate columns and lay ambushes south-west of Tangon between the railway line and the Mu River. Lieutenant-Colonel Brown took command of the C and D Company column and Major Ayub Khan commanded the A and B Company column.

It was a dark, moonless night as the columns moved off. No supporting arms could be taken as Headquarter Company was still in the rear, but a divisional signals detachment had been obtained to fill the gap caused by the absence of the unit's own Signal Platoon. From the outset, this detachment presented problems of its own, the chief being how to transport the set if jeeps or mules were not to accompany the columns. The final selection of a stretcher was an unhappy one, and it soon became apparent that the columns would never reach their appointed positions before daylight if they were to keep pace with the 22-set. Reluctantly it had to be returned to its base and the columns went on without wireless communications.

Neither ambush proved fruitful and at 0700 hours the following morning the two columns made their way to Zigon with instructions previously given, to contact Divisonal Headquarters there before going further west to link up with the leading elements of the British division converging from that direction. Back at Tangon, Headquarter Company had arrived from Kanbalu and Captain Steyn was at once

interviewed by the Divisional Commander, who was very anxious about the Battalion and its lack of wireless facilities. This officer was, therefore, sent out at first light in a jeep with another 22-set to contact the unit. But it was already too late.

After vacating the ambush positions both parties went by parellel routes towards Zigon, C and D Companies being on the west flank. The surrounding country was mainly paddy land cut up by clumps of trees and bamboos. Only about 800 yards separated the two parties but they could not see each other. Each adopted extended formation as they approached the village. With only another 200 yards to go, a burst of fire shattered the stillness of the morning and Jemadar Saithang Kuki and the three section commanders of the leading platoon were killed instantly. The column had been taken completely by surprise, for it had been led to suppose that Zigon was already occupied by units of the division and they now wondered by what terrible mistake the Battalion had been taken for the Japanese. As the column lay behind the low paddy 'bunds' and the firing continued, it became clear from the sound of the rifle reports and by the type of mortar grenades used, that the opposition was indeed Japanese.

Out in open country, the column was caught in an awkward and precarious position. As he sought out the best means of extricating his troops, the Commanding Officer raised himself on a 'bund' and was killed instantly when struck in the chest by a sniper's bullet. Command of the column now devolved on Major Marsden and the order to move from the exposed position was given. Under covering fire, sections and platoons inched behind what little cover the paddy 'bunds' afforded until the more solid protection of a large bamboo thicket was reached. Only then did the full shock of the situation came home to everyone. This sudden and bewildering turn in what was to have been a straight-forward operation was now made doubly worse by the complete absence of wireless communication. Before any action could be taken against Zigon, the columns would

have to link up and it was not until two hours later that they contacted each other in a pongyi kyaung, to which A and B Companies had withdrawn after also coming under fire and suffering casualties.

Patrols which were now sent out confirmed that an unknown number of Japanese occupied bunkers along the fringes of Zigon village. The new wireless set brought by Captain Steyn proved useless and could not provide the answer to the question: where was the division and what was it doing? Nothing was known about the plan of action against Zigon except that the village should already have been occupied by our troops. Indeed it had been arranged for the Battalion Quartermaster to meet the columns there with a hot meal at first light that morning. Major Khan could not interfere by initiating independent action of his own, so the signal jeep was sent back to Tangon and the Battalion remained where it was.

Lieutenant-Colonel Brown was a man who made friends easily because he radiated good fellowship and sincerity. He was humane and kind. Sometimes we may suspect he must have found it hard to maintain the face of the stern disciplinarian. He possessed the wonderful ability to be cheerful under the most adverse conditions, that made him ideally suited to command the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment during its early days and later to lead it into its unprecedented and successful battles. His boundless energy earned him the respect of all ranks. 'Bruno' as he was affectionately called was liked by all ranks, particularly men who adored him for his fearlessness and devotion to duty.

As a commanding officer in the field, Lieutenant-Colonel Brown possessed all the qualities of a fine soldier. His failings were few and stemmed mainly from his faith and confidence in the ability of the men of the Assam Regiment. His name justly deserves to go down in the annals of the Assam Regiment as one of its finest soldiers, to be loved, talked about, respected, admired and above all to be honoured. With his death, the 1st Battalion stood at the cross-roads of its history, but, sure on the foundation of his laying, it went ahead,

sadly at first but later with just confidence, to build for itself a proud record of achievement.

At a moving ceremony on the following morning, Lieutenant-Colonel W. F. Brown, D.S.O., O.B.E., was buried within the monastery grounds. There were tears in the eyes of many of the assembled officers and men who, worn out by marching and sleeplessness, by the fighting and lack of food, watched the burial of their Commanding Officer, who had borne the brunt of battle with them. No one could have loved the Assam Regiment more than the man who had commanded the 1st Battalion almost from the time of its birth, and who wore on his chest the ribbons of the awards which had so amply justified his pride in his unit. The tragedy was the greater, for Lieutenant-Colonel Brown was due to relinquish his command as soon as Shwebo was reached and had been granted permission to return to England on leave after an absence from his home of over eleven years. With his death, the Regiment lost a great soldier and a firm friend: 'Bruno' was mourned by every member of his battalion and the Regiment as a whole when the shocking news reached India.

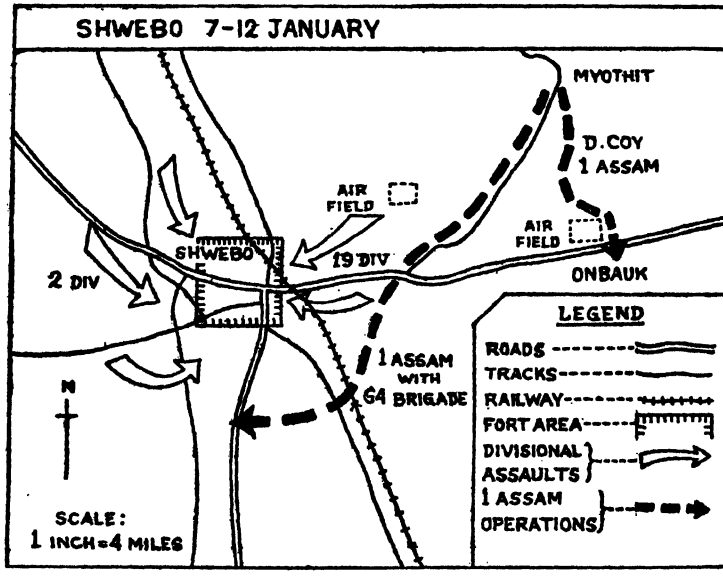
* * * *

Following the Zigon disaster the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was ferried forward to Kin-U to take over the defence of 62nd Brigade Headquarters on 6 January. On the previous day, Japanese resistance had been encountered in the area and continued to stiffen as troops of the division probed towards the outer defences of Shwebo. From Kin-U, the line of advance swung south-eastwards and on 7 January the Battalion was located at the village of Myothit, a former centre of Japanese opposition. The encirclement of Shwebo had begun and a protective screen was being thrown out to guard the east flank from attack from the direction of the Irrawaddy only a few miles away.

From Myothit, D Company was ordered to strike due south and reconnoitre a route to the airfield at Onbauk and

to establish a firm base there to block any Japanese movements along the Shwebo—Kyaukmyaung road. The main part of the Battalion moved from the village to come under command of 64th Indian Infantry Brigade and was given the task of protecting the field and mountain artillery columns in the brigade's sweep south of Shwebo; also they were to join forces with the 1st Battalion 6th Gorkha Rifles in preventing the enemy's escape southwards from the town.

The whole area was strangely quiet. There was little evidence of the battle beyond the faint rumble of artillery fire. The encirclement was completed at midday, when patrols of A and C Companies contacted elements of 2nd British Infantry Division approaching from the west. Meanwhile, at Shwebo the battle had flared up to its climax.



The race to Shwebo had been won by 19th Indian Infantry Division which, after smashing the strong enemy rearguard, entered the eastern outskirts of the town on 7 January. 2nd British Infantry Division arrived on

8 January and fought its way in from the north-west. In the ensuing battle, few of the Japanese defenders escaped and the town was completely cleared on 10 January by a combined armoured and infantry attack. Hundreds of Japanese had died in their bunkers and foxholes when the walls of the fort were pulverized and had collapsed onto their positions.

On 12 January, the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment retraced its path eastwards and rejoined 'B' Echelon at an airfield just east of Shwebo. As the Battalion column approached its destination, it experienced the bitter taste of aerial attack. Overhead, several Dakotas were busy dropping stores when they were surprised by a dozen or more Japanese fighters. Five of the unarmed and unescorted Dakotas were shot down within a few minutes and the Japanese aircraft then proceeded to strafe ground forces in the vicinity of the airfield. As the Battalion's Bren-guns went into action, pursuit planes of the Royal Indian Air Force arrived and the Zeros quickly made off to their base. Parties from the Battalion then went to attempt the rescue of the crew of one of the Dakotas.

The tremendous surge forward of 19th Indian Infantry Division's advance now slowed down as the Irrawaddy line was reached. Major-General Rees could now take stock of his forces and immediately he came up against the painful fact that his Reconnaissance Battalion was not in a fit state to fulfil its role. In fairness to the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment as much as to the division, it was necessary that some change be made and it was, therefore, decided that the 1st Battalion, now commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Ayub Khan, should exchange roles with the 1st Battalion 15th Punjab Regiment. Thus the Battalion became the divisional Defence Battalion. The change over was well received in the unit, where it was fully realized that it was, at least for the time being, ill-suited for independent operations lacking as it did, most of its supporting arms. In particular, the absence of the Signal Platoon was a serious drawback, and it had as already seen resulted in one calamity.

However, all this had to be weighed against the fact that the Battalion would now be split up with its companies employed on detachment duties, and would not, therefore, be able to operate very frequently as one unit.

After a short period while the Battalion concentrated at Onbauk the process of dispersal began. A Company joined 62nd Indian Infantry Brigade, B Company went to 98th Indian Infantry Brigade, while C Company joined 64th Indian Infantry Brigade. The remainder of the battalion, including D Company, took up position around Divisional Headquarters to afford local protection to that area. With the completion of these moves, another stage in the history of the unit came to a close. During the previous two months, the men had marched six hundred and thirty miles, excluding any distances covered on normal protective patrolling. The Mule Platoon had exceeded that figure by almost another hundred miles, but so well had Havildar Padmaram Mech, throughout this trying period, handled his platoon and charges that all his animals reached Onbauk in good condition.

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At this stage we might consider the wider picture of the Fourteenth Army front in order to appreciate the vital importance of the 19th Indian Infantry Division operations which were to follow.

Fourteenth Army at this time consisted of six Divisions and two armoured brigades, whereas Lieutenant-General Kimura the Japanese commander in Burma, had built up an opposing force of some nine divisions and was determined to destroy any bridge-heads formed across the Irrawaddy before they could deploy in strength. In order to do this, he was prepared to concentrate every available man in Central Burma and even to withdraw formations from the Arakan and from the Northern Combat Area Command. In spite of bombing attacks on his lines of communications, this concentration of forces was carried out with remarkable speed and efficiency.

Against this defence, Lieutenant-General Sir William Slim had to plan to deceive the Japanese about his intentions while getting all six divisions of IV and XXXIII Corps across the river in such a manner as to retain their full striking power.

19th Indian Infantry Division was to cross at a point due east of Shwebo and make the Japanese believe that this was to be our main threat to Mandalay and Central Burma. 20th Indian Infantry Division and 2nd British Infantry Division lined up in the triangle formed by the confluence of the Irrawaddy and Chindwin rivers, while 7th and 17th Indian Infantry Divisions, moving down the Gangaw Valley, threatened Pakokku and Chauk. 5th Indian Infantry Division remained as Army reserve.

It was paramount that the Japanese should be deceived and hopes were raised when 19th Indian Infantry Division's bridge-heads at Thabeitkyin and Kyaukmyaung, established on 14 January, drew off from the Mandalay area strong Japanese forces. A month later, 20th Indian Infantry Division and 7th Indian Infantry Division made simultaneous crossings at Allagappa and Nyaungu respectively. Both crossings lay exactly on Japanese inter-formation boundaries and the chaos these lucky selections caused contributed considerably to the success of the ventures, and, within 24 hours, both divisions were firmly established on the southern bank.

The 'coup de grace' was to be a direct thrust at Meiktila in Central Burma with all available armour supported by 17th Indian Infantry Division. This force was to pass through the Nyaungu bridge-head, overcome Japanese resistance to capture one of the airfields near Meiktila and defend the area in order to allow troop-carrying planes to land, so bringing 5th Indian Infantry Division into action. The whole of Central Burma was then to be sealed off and Meiktila secured.

The Japanese were bewildered and outmanoeuvred by the speed and success of all these crossings. Once their initial desperate resistance crumbled, the way to Meiktila

lay open and the Army Commander exploited his advantage to the limit. The armoured column was sent out. The town had excellent defensive positions and the surrounding country was unfavourable to movement by armoured forces. Nevertheless, the attacking forces swept on undaunted and assaulted the town at dawn on 28 February. Three days and nights of savage hand to hand fighting followed, until infantry supported by tanks fought their way to the centre of the town, killing and blasting the Japanese. On 4 March, Meiktila was secured and the key to all Burma lay in the grasp of the Fourteenth Army.

It will thus be seen that, as part of the overall plan of attack, 19th Indian Infantry Division's operations along the river front were most important. On their success the Army Commander placed great emphasis in this contest of tactical manoeuvre. Later, in his report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff, Vice-Admiral The Earl Mountbatten of Burma, Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia, wrote of the crossings:

> 'Two brigades of 19th Division fought their way eastward from Shwebo towards the Irrawaddy; and after reconnaissance crossings had been made, they crossed the river on the 14th January and secured a foothold at Thabeitkyin. On the following day, they secured a second foothold opposite Kyaukmyaung. The enemy laid down harassing artillery fire; but he had evidently been taken by surprise, and it was not until the Division was well established on the east bank that they launched a series of fierce counter attacks. The enemy had been led to suppose that the crossings had been made with the support of two other divisions, which were in fact not present. The Japanese commander rose to the bait, moving all his reserve forces to the area north of Mandalay; while the greatest artillery concentration which he could produce fell daily on the bridge-heads. But 19th Division held firm and gradually strengthened their positions.'
>
> And again:
>
> 'By the end of January, the enemy was fully aware of

the rapid build-up of 20th Division, under XXXIII Corps, on the north bank of the Irrawaddy in the area west of Mandalay; but he still believed — as Lieutenant-General Slim had hoped he might — that 19th Division, in its bridge-heads at Thabeitkyin and Kyaukmyaung, was under command of IV Corps. He, consequently, deduced that 19th Division's crossings were to be followed by the whole of IV Corps; and that both IV and XXXIII Corps were to the west of the Irrawaddy, massing for one drive to the north of Mandalay and for another from a point immediately to the west of the town. The enemy was further confused by the gradual southward advance of 36th British Division, which appeared to indicate a joint offensive by the Fourteenth Army and the Northern Combat Area Command forces. He, therefore, decided to concentrate all available forces on the destruction of 19th Division and, since Northern Combat Area Command had been weakened by the withdrawal of two Chinese divisions, he was unfortunately able to divert the whole of 15th and 53rd Japanese Divisions, together with a force of tanks, against 19th Division before it had consolidated its bridge-heads.

Very strong concentrations of artillery, the heaviest, that our troops had so far had to face — were built up around these two bridgeheads; the enemy bringing up not only divisional artillery of 15th and 53rd Japanese Divisions, but also odd batteries from other Japanese divisions. The enemy launched one infantry attack after another, day and night, for nearly a month; but although 19th Division had less than three months' battle experience, they fought like veteran troops and beat off the Japanese attacks.'

* * * *

Since the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was split up and a rifle company had been attached to each of the brigades, the unit was fully represented in all phases of the divisional assault on the Irrawaddy. From Onbauk B Company moved to join 98th Indian Infantry Brigade in its thrust north-eastwards to Tabeitkyin, while A and C

Companies moved to Kyaukmyaung. C Company crossed the river into the bridge-head on 15 January, while A Company took over the defence of 62nd Brigade Headquarters and assisted in the protection of the west bank crossing point. Much of the Battalion was therefore soon in contact with the Japanese and life as Defence Battalion promised to be anything but dull.

One Battalion patrol went further and penetrated deep behind the Japanese positions surrounding the Kyaukmyaung bridge-head. On 15 January Divisional Headquarters ordered the Battalion to send out one officer and 20 other ranks on a patrol which would cross the river, pass through the bridgehead area and then make its way eastwards to a village named Malegyi, about 14 miles beyond. At the village it was hoped that they would contact a party of American airmen who were believed to be stranded in the area, and guide them back to our lines.

In the early hours of the following morning, Lieutenant Littlewood, who had been chosen for this hazardous operation, slipped away from the Ngapyin-in perimeter with Jemadar Gobin Chandra Rava and 20 men of A Company, and moved quietly out into the barren rocky bamboo-covered country that forms the hinterland of the Irrawaddy at that point. As only could be expected, the entire area was teeming with Japanese who were active along every small path and occupied every village. The patrol was for much of the time forced to cut its way through the bamboo scrub, constantly lying low at the approach of Japanese parties and was denied all access to village water points. Strain and acute thirst caused the men to suffer terrible privations as they moved through the arid Japanese-infested region. Several times they were ambushed and scattered, each time they reformed and eluded their opponents. But it was all in vain, for on arrival at Malegyi they found strong Japanese forces in and around the village and no sign of the Americans.

The return journey was a small epic and was accomplished under dreadful circumstances. Still without water, some

of the men became delirious with raging thirst; most of them stumbled along unseeing and many not caring. The two officers kept the patrol together with grim determination. Walking into what appeared to be yet another ambush, they lay huddled in the jungle prepared to die or surrender. None were able to resist further. They could not believe their eyes when it turned out that they had met a party of the 1st Battalion 6th Gorkha Rifles who escorted them back to their positions, only a few hundred yards away on Minban Taung, a hill feature outside the main bridge-head perimeter.

Considering the circumstances under which the patrol had worked the remarkably low casualty list—two killed and one missing (but later recovered)—bears evidence of the skill and courage of every man in the patrol.

Further north, Major Calistan had arrived with B Company at Kabwet, midway between the two bridge-head areas, on 16 January, and had taken over the defence of the perimeter in conjunction with the 6th Battalion (Machine-Gun) 11th Sikh Regiment. That night, as soon as it became dark, they were repeatedly attacked by a force estimated to be about 200 strong. The attacks lasted throughout the night and early morning found the position entirely surrounded. Many of the Japanese had been killed and some of them lay within three yards of the forward bunkers. Any movement within the box itself evoked Japanese fire and was a most hazardous undertaking. As darkness approached again, the Japanese could be heard moving up closer to the company's positions and soon the tension and stillness of the night was broken as the machine-gunners opened up to repel the fury of their attack. Each assault was driven back but the Japanese reformed and came on again. Their casualties mounted considerably until they became out of all proportion to those suffered by the defenders or to the value of the position. But still they would not draw off. Finally two days later, on 20 January, the 2nd Battalion, The Royal Berkshire Regiment, arrived on the scene with a squadron of light tanks in support. The counter-attack, which at once followed, broke through the encircling forces

and succeeded in isolating and surrounding one party of the Japanese. B Company joining the attacking troops now moved in with fixed bayonets—mounting the first bayonet charge ever done by men of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment. The Japanese offered dogged resistance and unexpectedly an arduous battle ensued for the next five hours.

As the assault line moved forward from bunker to bunker the men of B Company distinguished themselves and seemed always to be in the thick of it throughout the battle. No one rendered a better account of himself than a young Sepoy, Dunio Angami, who had only about six months military service behind him. Alone he went forward to destroy three Japanese bunkers when the attacking forces were pinned down and unable to make any headway. In a most debonair way, he jumped from cover to cover and hurled his grenades. First one bunker fell silent, then another; but Sepoy Dunio had been wounded and still one more Japanese post remained in action. His gallant action had however so inspired his company that the third Japanese bunker was quickly liquidated. For his magnificent conduct he received an immediate award of the Military Medal; many who had seen him in action that day felt that he had deserved greater military honour.

Meanwhile, the remainder of the Battalion had been ordered to cross the Irrawaddy and concentrate in the Ngapyin-in perimeter by 26 January to take over part of the defence positions of 62nd Indian Infantry Brigade. Before this move took place, however, a sad accident robbed the Battalion of one of its best loved officers. Major John Corlett took over command of A Company on 16 January, after Major J. E. Taylor had succumbed to battle fatigue and had had to be evacuated. A few days later, he was testing his mortars with a new consignment of 2-inch mortar bombs when one of the bombs exploded inside a mortar barrel, mortally wounding him and Havildar Saitawna Lushai, and killing Sepoys Lahlira Lushai and Hauzama Lushai outright. Many other spectators also suffered injury. John, with his boisterous enthusiasm for everything, was

sadly missed; to him the Battalion owed much and his death cast a profound gloom over the whole unit.

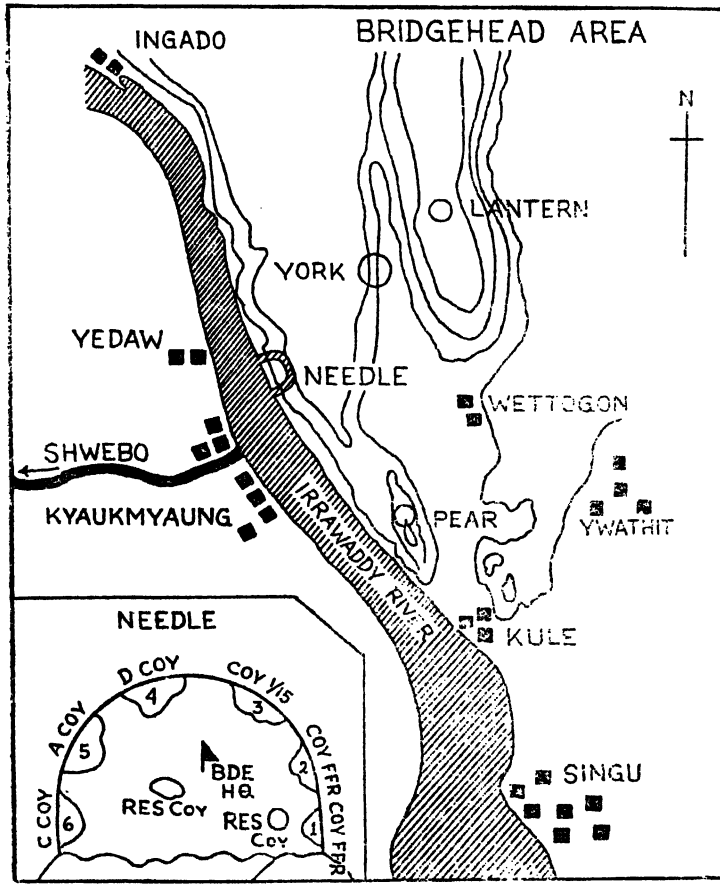
Officer casualties at and since Zigon meant reorganization of command and appointment within the unit. As it now moved into battle again across the Irrawaddy, the structure of command lay as follows :—

Commanding Officer	... Lieutenant-Colonel Ayub Khan
Second-in-Command	... Major E. P. Marsden
Adjutant	... Captain D. C. Straw
Quartermaster	... Captain T. R. Littlewood
A Company	... Major M. G. Williamson
B Company	... Major A. I. Calistan, M.C.
C Company	... Major Sidhiman Rai, M.C.
D Company	... Major D. E. Lloyd Jones

The Kyaukmyaung bridge-head area consisted of four separate localities. The firm base and beach-head was at Ngapyin-in (known by the code name of Needle), a saucer-shaped position on the river bank ringed by six low hills each a task for one rifle company in close defence. Dominating the immediate surrounding country two miles south of Needle was a low ridge (called Pear). Then, four thousand yards from the river and to the north-east of Needle, was Minban Taung, a low hill feature, nick-named Lantern, which was in fact of little tactical value and had been occupied initially as an observation post. Lantern, being waterless, depended on the fourth defended position, known as York, as an intermediary supply point and patrol base between it and Needle. The whole position had been established in a rush operation, once it had been found that the Japanese were not defending that particular area in strength. Any defects of the terrain were, therefore, accepted in the interests of speed, and it was indeed fortunate that the chosen point of crossing proved to be so eminently defensible.

It was to Needle that the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment moved on 29 January to take over three of the six company localities. Japanese reaction to the establishment of the bridge-head had initially been inexplicably slow, but with

the passage of a few days, his counter action was intensified and he soon employed a heavy concentration of artillery in an attempt to destroy our forces east of the river. From 20 to 28 January Needle was subjected to heavy and prolonged



gun fire after two determined infantry attacks had been broken up on the perimeter. It was estimated that the Japanese had brought up eight 70-mm Battalion guns, sixteen 75-mm guns, ten 105-mm Howitzers or guns and

four 150-mm Howitzers. This in fact constituted the heaviest concentration of Japanese artillery employed anywhere during the Burma campaign. The 70-mm guns were used as roving support during the infantry attacks and were boldly used up to within a few score yards of the perimeter. The medium guns were situated many miles to the south near Singu and had to fire at the upper limit of range; but they were also out of range of 19th Indian Infantry Division's 25-pounder batteries and at extreme range for 5.5-inch guns.

As the Battalion filed from the disembarkation point at Needle, almost the first thing they saw was a rough wooden cross over a fresh grave bearing the inscription:

No 635 Naik TEKASASHI AO
ASSAM REGT

This NCO, who had done such sterling work as a member of the Mol He patrol before Jessami, had been killed shortly after C Company crossed the river on 16 January. There was, however, no time for reflection, the task at hand was urgent and the men soon came under the spell of tension which gripped all those already in Needle. The bridge-head commander was apprehensive of Japanese attacks supported by flame-throwers and a warning of this had gone out to the defenders. C Company was found in position at Number 6 locality and A and D Companies moved quickly to take over Number 5 and Number 4 localities respectively. Major Marsden acted as Reserve Company commander with men from Headquarter and Administration Companies under him, while Battalion Headquarters dug in near Brigade Headquarters.

Each locality was on a small rocky hillock covered with clumps of bamboo and scrub, and had been carefully sited. The ground was extremely dry and hard and most of the bunkers were, therefore, more like the 'sangars' used in frontier warfare. But they were strong, and were well fortified by barbed-wire entanglements to the front. Artillery and mortar batteries, acting in close co-operation, had

previously registered a series of 'defensive-fire' targets, and these could be shelled at very short notice.

That very night, when the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was still settling down in its new position, the Japanese made their biggest single attempt to liquidate the bridge-head. After a great weight of artillery fire had pounded down on the area for almost an hour just as dusk began to turn to night, two simultaneous attacks, each in strength of approximately a hundred, were mounted against C and D Company positions. Divisional artillery across the river quickly joined in the battle and the noise was terrific as the Sikh medium machine-guns and Assam Regiment 3-inch mortars also went into action. On the extreme left, C Company had little difficulty in beating off all attempts to crack their perimeter, but on the D Company sector some of the Japanese succeeded in penetrating the defences. So small and close was the bridge-head that D Company Commander could alert the Reserve Company merely by shouting down to them. In the event, the reserve forces were not required; the Japanese who had broken in were driven out again by Subedar Khagendra Nath Gogoi and a few sepoys of D Company Headquarters in a spirited counterattack before they could do any damage.

At 2230 hours, the Japanese artillery opened up again and was followed by more determined attacks, this time concentrated against A and D Company positions and also Number 2 locality, which was held by a company of the Frontier Force Rifles. Again these attacks were broken up by extremely accurate artillery and mortar bombardment and by the steady well-controlled fire of the companies and machine-gun teams. In the early hours of the following morning, as a misty chill from the river began to creep over the area, attacks were made on practically all localities, but these were of lesser intensity and had the apparent object of recovering the dead and wounded, who lay sprawled out over the wire entanglements.

Although many men on the perimeter received minor injuries from shrapnel and fragments of shattered stone,

the Battalion had not suffered a single serious casualty during a night of most desperate fighting, surpassed only by the fighting at Jessami and Kohima. Survivors of those other battles set a fine example to their newer brethren and the unholy shrieking of the enemy, as he attacked, affected them not at all.

The next six days were spent in quieter but not less tense circumstances. The Japanese constant probing attacks on the perimeter by night and 'jitter parties' by day kept the defenders on their toes and prevented relaxation of any kind. Even at this stage, the Divisional Commander had no very clear idea of the Japanese strength opposing him. Each time a patrol went out, it ran into considerable difficulties and many casualties were suffered during operations designed to relieve divisional forces on Pear and Lantern. Later, some light tanks were towed across the river on rafts and soon made their presence felt.

On 31 January, D Company moved out of Needle bound for Lantern to support the 2nd Battalion The Royal Welch Regiment already there. They were lucky, as it was the first time for the relief operation to be carried out without being ambushed. On arrival at Lantern, the company took charge of one of the survivors of Lieutenant Littlewood's patrol, who had been picked up by other patrols. The wretched sepoy was little more than skin and bone, and he told how he had not eaten for almost two weeks except for a few handfuls of rice dropped by a passing Japanese patrol. After a few days' rest and nourishment, however, he was asking for a rifle so that he could take part in the operations; such was the spirit of the men then and throughout the campaign.

Of the Minban Taung position, the company commander writes:

> 'I could never overpaint the physical difficulties of this little outpost. There was no protection from the sun and water was very scarce — we were down to one cup per man per day for all purposes.
>
> 62nd Brigade Headquarters with tanks and the 4th

Battalion 6th Gorkha Rifles came on a sweep to Yeshin from the bridge-head to take away our casualties but only succeeded on drawing Jap artillery fire, resulting in 100 Gorkha and 51 Welch casualties and 120 mules killed. Thus no mules were available to bring up our water and rations for another two days. It was a period of going without water and suffering heavy Jap artillery fire while we lay in shocking heat on an exposed rocky outcrop.'

Meanwhile, at Needle, B Company had rejoined the Battalion after its operations around Kabwet. In a few attacks on 19th Indian Infantry Division's bridge-heads, the Japanese had repeated the mistake they had made once before at Kohima, when they continued to resist long after it should have been clear to them that their tactics had miscarried. They achieved nothing but to increase casualties amongst their own troops, while seriously undermining their position on other fronts where formations of Fourteenth Army were massing for the main assault against the Irrawaddy line. When the Japanese Command did realize its error, the greater part of 15th and 53rd Divisions were withdrawn south to Mandalay.

The only forces now left to oppose 19th Indian Infantry Division consisted of units in actual contact with the division and those units of 18th Japanese Division falling back before the advance of NCAC troops. The latter had brought the American and Chinese forces to the final stages of their campaign, culminating in the restoration of land communications with China and the completion of the Stilwell Road.

19th Indian Infantry Division now linked its two bridge-heads of Thabeitkyin and Kyaukmyaung on the west bank of the river and extended its grip on the east bank. By the middle of February it was poised ready for the thrust southwards. The division attacked and pushed forward relentlessly in a series of leap-frogging movements — brigade through brigade. The Japanese opposing elements

were completely confused and demoralized by the speed and force of the advance, which was supported from the air by Mosquitoes, Hurricanes and Beaufighters. In the first week, a number of Japanese strongholds were either assaulted or by-passed. By 15 March a bridge-head had been established over the Chaungmagyi, the last natural barrier before Mandalay, and the way to the city lay open.

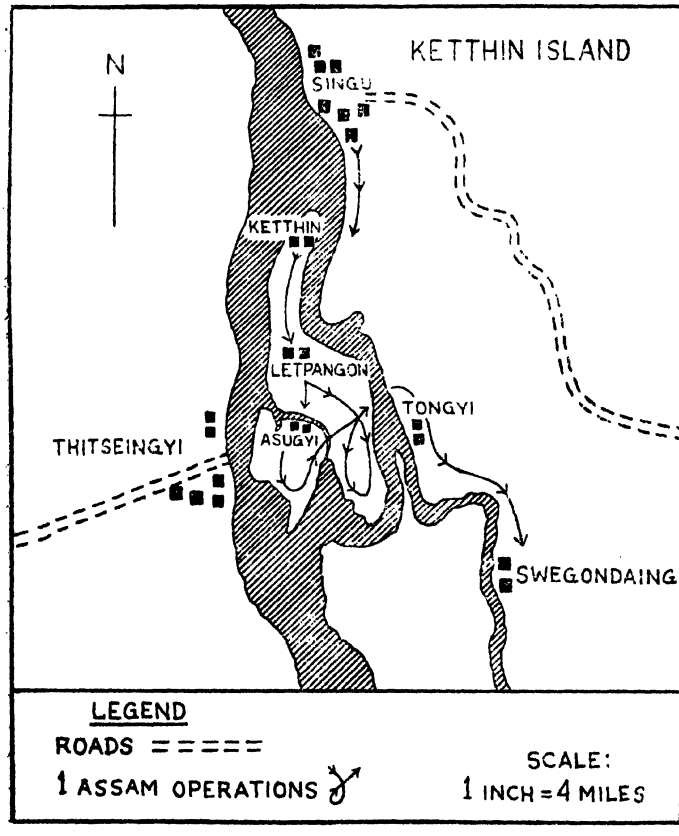
In this fast moving campaign, the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment played a very necessary, if rather unspectacular, part. As Defence Battalion it operated in the rear or on the flank of the forward troops, but it had its share of brushes with the Japanese.

From Ngapyin-in, the Battalion, minus D Company, moved south to Kule on 11 February and took up positions around the village. D Company arrived the following day from Lantern and dug in on one of the defensive areas. Japanese artillery was still most active from time to time. C Company felt some of its effects before they had properly settled in and some men were injured.

During the night, each of the company positions was subjected to heavy attacks and an all-night battle raged as Japanese infiltrators broke through and got within a few yards of Kule village and Divisional Headquarters. The attack continued until early dawn, when tanks were able to operate and mop up Japanese stragglers caught between the company positions and in the Battalion Headquarters area. During the night, the Battalion suffered seven casualties, but the Japanese figures in killed and wounded far exceeded this number — for them it had been a costly and unprofitable night. Until the Battalion moved again, this time to Singu, a few days later, it carried out active patrolling but did not meet with the Japanese.

While at Singu a new Commanding Officer arrived, Lieutenant-Colonel E. H. M. Parsons, transferred from the 2nd King Edward VII Own Gorkha Rifles, assuming command of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment on 27 February. A very experienced and senior officer, Hugh Parsons was to remain with the Battalion throughout the remainder

of the Burma campaign and later to guide the unit along the paths of peace-time training and organization. His energy and determination that the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment should not be inferior to any other unit of the division made itself felt within a very short time of his arrival. His authoritative personality accepted no inefficiency and many old habits and ways of the Battalion had to be changed,



and quickly. Another welcome arrival at this time was that of Captain Wood with his signallers from Moreh after an absence of two and a half months.

Major Ayub Khan now reverted to his former appoint-

ment of Second-in-Command for a short while before leaving to take up command of one of the battalions of his old regiment, the 14th Punjab Regiment. Major Marsden also left on posting to the Regimental Training Centre at Shillong.

As February came to a close, the Battalion prepared to leave Singu and take part in the general advance southwards. It also carried out a small independent operation to clear Ketthin Island, a large island about ten miles long and four miles wide in the middle of the Irrawaddy, the retention of which by the Japanese gave them an ideal artillery observation post and also threatened the division's flank.

A Company crossed over to land on the sandy beaches of Ketthin Island on 1 March and moved quickly to occupy the only hill feature there at the northernmost headland of the island. The Commanding Officer accompanied the force and at once ordered the company to advance and clear the next village some two miles further on. It had not been possible to lay on any artillery support from divisional sources but alternative arrangements had been made with a squadron of tanks to shell the village from the west bank of the river on a timed programme. Considerable care had, therefore, to be taken. Although things went well, the operation was slow. Small groups of the Japanese covered all likely lines of approach and, by dusk, only half the village had been cleared. Two men of A Company had been killed and the company now settled down to dig itself in for the night while the Japanese, unseen, but uncomfortably close, harassed the operation with showers of grenades.

Spasmodic firing went on all night. Once, the Japanese, occupied a position from where it was all too easy for him to lob grenades at one of our posts. A small counterattack righted the situation but not before more casualties had been inflicted on the company. Fleeting shadows in the moonlight played tricks on the men and a poor old mad woman, the only villager left, added to their difficulty of determining foe from shadow as she moved about in no-man's-land. In the morning the wounded, eight in number,

were evacuated and it was found that the Japanese had drawn off.

It was now considered that the Japanese could not be cleared from the island with any great speed by a limited one company offensive. D and part of Headquarter Company were therefore ordered across the river in support of A Company. In the quick moving operation which now followed, the Battalion was put through its paces and had a foretaste of what was expected of it by its new Commanding Officer. A few more minor and isolated encounters with the Japanese brought the operation to its conclusion. The Japanese had made off and seemed to have removed the three 75-mm guns which were known to have been on the island at one time. As the Battalion assembled ready to re-cross to the mainland, a signal was flashed from the Divisional Commander: 'Congratulations on your clearing Ketthin Island.'

Forward elements of the division had by now forced their way past a dominating feature which had been heavily fortified by the Japanese, and the speed of the advance down the east bank increased considerably. The Battalion's re-crossing of the river took place smoothly. By midnight, the troops were in their bivouac quarters and the following morning the unit was marching down the road through a choking pall of dust churned up by the passage of armoured vehicles. No greater evidence that the war had now entered the dry zone of Burma was needed than to march down that road.

Brief halts were made at various points, defensive positions taken up, Japanese stragglers chased, but the relentless advance of 19th Indian Infantry Division went on. In this hectic race for Mandalay, detachments of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment joined the three Brigade Headquarters, but wherever the men of the 1st Battalion were, they rarely spent more than one night in any one place.

19th Indian Infantry Division, after capturing the carefully prepared positions at Madaya before the Japanese had time to fall back on them, pushed on. On 9 March the leading troops entered Mandalay and the two strong points

around the city, Mandalay Hill and Fort Dufferin, where the Japanese had concentrated nearly all their defending troops, were immediately surrounded and attacked. Major-General Rees, as usual, was right up with his leading units. His bodyguard, supplied by men of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment, had the harrowing experience of being ambushed while out with him on one occasion. Fortunately, the General escaped unhurt, but one of the sepoys travelling in his jeep was shot in the head and died of his wounds.

While the flood of fighting went on to clear the approaches to Mandalay, the Battalion was at Mingan, seven miles north of the city. The Commanding Officer took advantage of this brief pause to examine the fitness of his officers and non-commissioned officers in their various appointments. The whole question of promotion and appointment was thoroughly thrashed out. Although the axe was ruthlessly used in some cases it was in a far more competent state that the Battalion moved into Mandalay on 16 March.

Mandalay Hill had been captured by the 4th Battalion 4th Gorkha Rifles and the Royal Berkshires on the evening of 11 March, after 24 hours of savage hand to hand fighting. The last of the Japanese defenders had been finally destroyed when petrol drums were rolled into the tunnels below the Buddhist monastery in which they were hiding and fired by the use of tracer bullets. Meanwhile Fort Dufferin defied assault, but was completely surrounded by the time the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment arrived on the scene to join ranks with the encircling forces. A position was taken up around a pongyi kyaung at the base of Mandalay Hill and the Battalion given the task of covering the north-east sector of the fort by day and sending out probing patrols along its walls by night.

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Mandalay had been bombed time and again since the first entry of the Japanese into Burma and the majority of the city's buildings lay in ruins. Fort Dufferin dominated

the northern part of the city, with its massive mediaeval bastions, turrets and a moat two hundred feet wide. The walls of the fort stretched out to form a square two thousand yards in extent and behind these twenty foot high brick walls was an earth embankment seventy feet thick at the base. Within the walls lay the gilded palace of the last of Burma's monarchs, King Thibaw. It was hoped that the palace would escape the destruction of war, but, being constructed mainly of wood, the odds were very much against this happening. It was not long after the artillery opened up on the fort that the palace was seen to catch fire and was rapidly consumed in the conflagration which followed. It would be difficult, however, to find an artillery officer to admit that one of his guns was responsible for the fatal shot.

After heavy bombing, attacks had caused some damage to the north wall and the breach made wider by medium artillery fire directed over open sights at a distance of only about five hundred yards from the walls, the way for an assault by the infantry had been prepared. On 17 March, troops of 62nd Indian Infantry Brigade and the 1st Battalion 15th Punjab Regiment tried to cross the moat and scale the breach but were driven back at every attempt. Three more unsuccessful attempts were made the next day, our troops having to withdraw on each occasion in the face of withering enemy fire. Even aircraft found the walls difficult targets, but the attacks went on and the enemy was forced to remain constantly on the alert.

Night patrols investigated every inch of the north-eastern part of the fort and discovered a disused tunnel leading beneath the walls. It appeared to be an ancient sewage outlet, but promised to be a possible means of entrance if certain iron grilles could be removed. Plans were laid for the introduction of the whole of D Company of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment into the fort via the tunnel and work on the grilles was started. This however, was not necessary in the event, for on 20 March, after a particularly heavy aerial attack on the fort, the Japanese decided to abandon their position and moved out undetected under

the cover of darkness. The first sign that the fort was empty was when a small band of Anglo-Burmese civilians scaled the walls and hoisted white flags.

During the siege operations, the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was visited by many high-ranking officers. The Supreme Allied Commander, the Army Commander and Mr. R. G. Casey, Governor of Bengal at that time, were all entertained at Battalion Headquarters which provided a good vantage point from which to view the assault operations. Our guests expressed keen interest in the adventures and composition of the Regiment and met many officers and men of the unit.

The capture of Mandalay was a fitting climax to the advance of the 19th Indian Infantry Division, which had gained for itself a great name and had killed over six thousand of the Japanese between 9 January and 21 March. The Japanese had left behind in the fort vast quantities of stores and equipment and finally failed to make good their escape, for they were intercepted and few managed to find their way out of the area. South of the city, on the banks of the Myitnge River, the Japanese had been forced to abandon all their artillery, and guns of many varying calibres lay bogged down in the mud and slime of the river as evidence of their distraught flight.

For the moment, 19th Indian Infantry Division could relax while other formations carried on the attack further south and to the west. From the time the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment had caught up with the division at Kanbalu, it had played its full share, although often split up by companies and platoons. It had continued to enlarge on its reputation of being able to cope cheerfully with difficulties and shortages with little outside help. It had been a great disappointment to everyone that these deficiencies in men and material had precluded the Battalion from assuming its proper role and thus winning greater honours. However, Mandalay marked the end of a long period of indecision and the unit now looked forward to a new prosperity under its determined Commanding Officer.

CHAPTER XII

THE RANGOON ROAD

April 1945 — August 1945

WITH THE FALL of Mandalay, the main operational tasks allotted to XXXIII Corps were successfully concluded. By the end of March, the battle of annihilation in the Mandalay plain was in its closing stages. 20th Indian Infantry Division, after successfully crossing the Irrawaddy, had fought magnificently and had quickly converted its defensive bridge-head positions into bases from which the Japanese formations opposing them could be battered and destroyed.

Meanwhile, on the IV Corps front very heavy fighting had been taking place. The Japanese had made strenuous efforts to recapture Meiktila and had achieved a considerable part of their plan before being checked. Yet, in spite of being outnumbered on the ground, our troops never lost the initiative, and full control of the situation was finally regained when they were reinforced by 5th Indian Infantry Division. One of its brigades had been flown in to one of the captured airfields, while the remaining two brigades followed at the heels of 17th Indian Infantry Division along the land route. In the face of the superior quality of our troops and the mobility of our armoured forces, the Japanese command had no alternative but to order a general withdrawal, and attempt to hold the Allied advance down the axis of the Mandalay — Rangoon road and railway while re-organizing and fortifying rearward areas to meet the threat to his very existence in Burma.

The full force of the attack now swung due south along the line of the railway while a secondary movement made a strong thrust towards Prome in the Irrawaddy valley to the west. In the Arakan, XV Corps was converging on

Akyab and Ramree Island and plans were drawn up for a sea-borne invasion, supported by paratroops, with Rangoon as the objective.

It was considered essential that the Burmese capital, with its port and harbour facilities, should be in Allied hands before the break of the first monsoon rains in early May. This meant that the ground forces would have to cover a distance of over 300 miles during the month of April — a formidable task which gave no guarantee of success unless aided by sea-borne action across the Bay of Bengal.

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Behind all this activity along what had now become the main front, 19th Indian Infantry Division, fresh from its successes at Mandalay, rested at Meiktila a few days before moving southwards. The 1st Battalion Assam Regiment spent those days on local defence in and around Mandalay and even managed to stage a full scale Battalion training exercise before being ordered to Meiktila. In the words of one officer taking part, 'We certainly learnt from that exercise and found out that the Commanding Officer was a master of scathing epithet'. Platoons were still out on Brigade Headquarters protection duties, and in addition, A Company was now detailed to escort the 19th Indian Infantry Division mule column as it marched to Toungoo, a distance of well over two hundred miles. With the arrival of 72nd Brigade of 36th Division, which had reverted to the command of Fourteenth Army from the Northern Combat Area Command, the Battalion was relieved of its duties and left Mandalay on 3 April to arrive at Meiktila via Paleik on 8 April.

Numerous Japanese pockets still resisted in the Meiktila area and the Battalion had at once to retrace its path back to Magyidaw some 15 miles to the north and there, under command of 98th Brigade, played a part in mopping up operations. In conjunction with the 4th Battalion 4th Gorkha Rifles and supported by armoured cars of the 8th

Cavalry Regiment, the Battalion carried out intensive patrolling but with only minor success, for the numbers of Japanese in the area had been considerably over-estimated and the brigade sweep yielded a poor return. However, in one brush with the Japanese, parties of B and C Companies captured a Japanese 75-mm gun after killing its crew. The Battalion also captured from the Japanese a bullock which was adopted as a regimental mascot; under the name of 'George' it remained with the unit until the final departure from Burma in 1947.

Once back in Meiktila, the Battalion took over the defence of Meiktila (North) airfield from 9th Indian Infantry Brigade of 5th Division. A Company was still away with the mule column and D Company now provided all Brigade Headquarter platoons, so allowing the remaining companies to muster complete. Under these fairly static conditions, the Commanding Officer took the opportunity of initiating a programme of training. Routine patrols continued to scour the surrounding area, but for the next two weeks a start was made to improve the individual soldier's knowledge of platoon and company training. This training was widened when arrangements were made for officers to gain some air experience by flying on close support sorties with the 82nd United States Army Air Force Squadron of 221st Group. The Commanding Officer knew that hard days were still ahead and his determination that the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment should acquit itself creditably was evident to all. Everyone, therefore, set to with a will, and morale had never been higher, with news coming in almost hourly of the tremendous advances being made by our forward troops. Pyinmana was taken on 21 April, Toungoo the next day and, by 29 April, our leading forces had entered Pegu only 40 miles from Rangoon itself. The monsoon continued to hold off but ominous black clouds were beginning to creep up from the south.

On 29 April, the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment handed over its duties to units of 36th British Division and moved in motor transport to Toungoo to take over

responsibility for the defence of the town, where 19th Indian Infantry Division Headquarters was now located. The forward thrust of the Allied attack had been so swift that troops had swept into the town three days ahead of schedule and had taken the Japanese completely by surprise. Indeed, as the armoured column drove into the town, an indignant Japanese traffic policeman tried to stop them, but they ignored his signals and ran him down!

Although the advance of the forward troops had carried them far to the south of Toungoo, by the time 1st Battalion Assam Regiment arrived there, the area was still a centre of strong resistance. East of the Sittang River and along the Mawchi road, the Japanese could still be expected in large numbers and sufficiently organized to launch planned attacks. They were known to be reinforced by fresh formations from across the Salween River and Siam to the east. To the west, in the Pegu Yomas, it was known that large bodies of Japanese had withdrawn before 20th Indian Infantry Division and had taken refuge in the jungle-covered hills. With the long narrow Allied salient dividing these two forces, it seemed most probable that the Japanese would attempt to link their forces and make another stand in the hills on the east bank of the Sittang. Should they try to do this, their route would almost certainly be through or very near to Toungoo.

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Immediately on arrival at Toungoo, an extensive patrolling programme was laid down. Soon the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was deployed over a wide area on both sides of the Sittang. During enemy shelling on 1 May, the Battalion suffered one fatal casualty, but soon struck back after the unit had moved to Tennant airfield, a few miles to the north of Toungoo. A strong Japanese force infiltrated into the area during the night of 4/5 May and attempted to destroy aircraft in the dispersal bays. Fighting patrols of C Company detected the intruders and gave chase after

killing one and wounding another. To prevent the recurrence of this sort of attack, companies and platoons scoured the surrounding area, never idle or at rest for very long. With armoured cars of the 8th Cavalry in support, they patrolled at all hours, searching out and destroying isolated Japanese forces and rounding up many forlorn, starving and abandoned stragglers who had become separated from their own formations.

Across the Sittang on 8 May, a platoon patrol under command of Lieutenant J. D. Chadwick crept up on the small village of Piennebin. As they watched before entering the village, they saw a dozen or more Japanese busy preparing defence positions, while five or six others searched the deserted houses from which the terrified villagers had fled. The platoon went into the attack and when the Bren gun opened up two of the surprised Japanese fell, while the others succeeded in reaching their fox holes.

Courage and skill were now required to defeat the Japanese, but those qualities were all part of Lance-Naik Yambhamo Lotha, one of the section's group commanders. He decided that his group could get at the Japanese and he, therefore, took them forward. At the edge of the village clearing, grenades were got ready and Yambhamo with a terrific Naga war-cry and blazing sten gun rushed out at the head of his men. Grenades were thrown under one house where the Japanese were hiding and the position silenced. The other Japanese did not wait to be attacked but took to their heels and disappeared into the jungle leaving three more of their number dead, on the ground, while others were seen to have been wounded. Yambhamo was proud of his group's work and even prouder when he learnt a short while later that he had been awarded the Military Medal for his own personal skill and initiative during the action.

It was a strenuous but exciting time for all the patrols that went out; morale rose higher each time positive evidence was brought back that the Japanese were beginning to crack under the strain placed on them, and the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was in fine fettle. Some newcomers and

reinforcements under Captain M. T. Procter had arrived during this early period at Toungoo, eager to get to grips with the Japanese. Previously, two other officers, Lieutenants C. Silk and R. van Spall had joined the Battalion at Mandalay.

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19th Indian Infantry Division (less one brigade) was by this time deployed along the main road between Toungoo and Pyu. Further to the north on the Kalaw road, the remaining brigade (98th) had taken over operations to clear the difficult mountain sector to the north and east of Kalaw from a brigade of 36th Division. In the Toungoo area, priority had been given to operations on the Mawchi road, since, up to this time, the Japanese had made no concerted efforts to break out from across the Pegu Yomas. Progress was necessarily slow against the Japanese, strongly entrenched, in close mountain country. The only possible line of advance was along the narrow road and as one strong point after another was gradually overcome, it became necessary to secure the rearward areas along the entire length of the road.

To help in this operation, 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was on 17 May relieved of its airfield defence duties and moved across the Sittang to take over a firm base at milestone 3½ on the road to Mawchi. It became immediately engaged on vigorous patrolling and laying ambushes to protect the right flank of the advance. Once more operating in hilly jungle country, it was clear that the men had lost none of their old skill and aptitude for this type of warfare. Practically every patrol returned to report successful encounters with the Japanese and brought back more substantial proof of their superiority in the form of prisoners and captured weapons, documents and material. On one occasion, a patrol even returned with an elephant complete with its Korean driver.

The period which saw out the month of May was crowded with excitement. Never since the days of Ring Contour

during the final phase of the battle of Kohima had the Battalion operated in such close and continual proximity with the enemy. As the number of casualties inflicted mounted, so was the superiority in ability and initiative of all ranks over that of their opponents clearly apparent. Many were the instances of steadiness and gallantry in the face of danger. Such was the nature of the campaign that small examples of heroism could not always be cited for official recognition, but the record of this period would be incomplete if one failed to mention a few names.

Havildar Bholanath Sarma commanded a fighting patrol on one occasion when his platoon came under heavy fire and suffered two casualties. He deployed to cover the two wounded men, who lay exposed on the jungle track, and then went forward with two sepoys to rescue them. Time and again he was driven back, but he persevered with complete disregard for his personal safety until he finally succeeded in his task, shortly before Japanese reinforcements arrived on the scene from nearby posts.

At Kyattaik Auk, in the vicinity of the Mawchi road, Sepoy Lalthanzauva Lushai was a member of a fighting patrol which suddenly came under heavy machine-gun and rifle fire from a well concealed Japanese position. A sepoy fell wounded in the open ground in front of the ambush position. Lalthanzauva without hesitation crawled forward over 60 yards to reach his comrade and dragged him back to safety over ground still swept by Japanese fire.

Examples of unselfishness and comradeship had thus become as much an integral part of the soldier of the Assam Regiment as amongst the ranks of any of the old and famous regiments of the Indian Army. The 1st Battalion Assam Regiment in its short career had grown up fast and the Battalion records of this period also make special mention of some of the more newly recruited members such as Sepoys Lalringliana Lushai, Zamkhotinlian Kuki and Chalmawia Lushai, all of whom displayed skill and courage in the face of the Japanese and inspired their comrades on several successful patrol operations.

On 30 May, 1st Battalion Assam Regiment with a battery of mountain artillery and one troop of armoured cars was given an independent task. This operation, known as 'Operation Potomac', consisted of capturing and clearing the small hill township of Thandaung, which lay on a branch road some 15 miles north of the main Mawchi road. The advance guard of the column consisted of B Company in motor transport and a section of armoured cars. Short of milestone 21 B Company debussed and continued on foot to encounter a Japanese ambush party supported by machine-guns. A flanking attack was at once mounted under cover of supporting fire from the accompanying armoured cars and the opposition was completely routed. By midday the focal point of the attack, the manager's bungalow on a small tea estate, had been captured and those of the Japanese not killed in the battle had withdrawn into the surrounding hills beyond range of normal patrols. On the following day, the remainder of the column arrived, bivouacked at milestone 23 and then moved on to Thandaung to enter the town without meeting further opposition, but collecting two Japanese stragglers on the way.

Thandaung was of little account in the main Japanese delaying operation, but the task had been completed with notable judgment, speed and efficiency and fortunately without casualties.

After almost a month of the tension of continuous patrolling in difficult conditions some relaxation was now possible. The area surrounding Thandaung was kept under strict surveillance, but the Japanese were not in evidence. Contact was however made with elements of Force 136, a guerrilla organization which was charged with the prevention of the Japanese escaping eastwards through the Karen Hills, and the two forces acted in close co-operation.

On 18 June, the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was relieved by the Royal Berkshire Regiment and was sent to Yedashe some 17 miles north of Toungoo on the main Rangoon road. At Yedashe the Battalion was to be properly rested and allowed to begin training again. D Company,

absent for so long on brigade duties, was relieved a short while later and rejoined the main body. The Battalion, after almost three months, was a complete unit once again.

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On the wider front at this time, 'Operation Dracula', the sea-borne assault on Rangoon, began with the dropping of a battalion of 50th Indian Parachute Brigade at the mouth of the Rangoon River. Before the main landing took place, however, an aircraft flying over Rangoon reported that a message was painted on the roof of the jail which said that the Japanese had gone. The bombardment of the approach defences continued, but no Japanese activity was observed. On the afternoon of 2 May, a Mosquito pilot crash-landed on Mingaladon airfield and walked into Rangoon to confirm that the Japanese had indeed completed their evacuation of the city. Later in the evening, he sailed down the river in a sampan to pass on the news to the vanguard of the assault forces. The next day Rangoon was reoccupied by Allied forces and it was not a moment too soon—a few hours after the first landings torrential rains fell, heralding the arrival of the monsoon.

7th and 20th Indian Infantry Divisions had meanwhile pressed on down the Irrawaddy Valley to destroy all organized Japanese opposition around Prome, while 17th and 5th Indian Infantry Divisions were still held up 32 miles from Rangoon at the time 'Dracula' was completed. The Japanese Command now realized that Burma was lost to them and henceforward, Field Marshal Terauchi, their Supreme Commander in the South-East Asia theatre, planned to concentrate his forces by withdrawing eastward into Siam and Malaya. Orders to this effect were sent out to all Japanese formations remaining in action and with whom wireless contact could still be established. This led to the Battle of the Break-out, which was to mark the final and complete defeat of the Japanese in Burma.

Now that the main campaign in Burma was virtually

concluded, an overall reorganization of the Army command took place to pave the way for further impending large-scale operations directed against Malaya. Fourteenth Army Headquarters was withdrawn to India to take control of XV Corps and XXXIV Corps which were grouped for a sea-borne assault on the peninsula coast. On 28 May, XXXIII Corps was disbanded and reformed on the same day as Twelfth Army, under command of Lieutenant-General Sir Montagu Stopford, K.B.E., C.B., D.S.O., M.C., with its headquarters in Rangoon. All divisions hitherto operating in the Burma theatre came under this new command, except 26th Indian Infantry Division and 254th Indian Tank Brigade, which were now also withdrawn to India.

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At Yedashe the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment occupied the railway and Courthouse area and there settled down to enjoy the comparative comfort of the static base. The fourth anniversary celebrations of the raising of the Regiment, postponed because of the Thandaung operations, were held on 23 June in great style. A full Battalion parade and march-past were held in the morning, while the afternoon and evening were given over to jollification and the entertainment of guests, amongst whom was the officiating Divisional Commander, Major-General C. Goulder, D.S.O., M.C.

The next day training combined with active operations began. Some anxious moments and many successes were to be the Battalion's lot during the weeks which followed as it guarded a long frontage north of Yedashe, a full twenty miles to the small township of Myohla. Running north to south, in this area were the three lines of communication, the road, railway and river, each separated from the other by only a few miles. The Japanese would have to pass across them if they were to escape from the Pegu Yomas to the east. To cover the allotted area, Lieutenant-Colonel Parsons was given command of a varied assortment of troops. In numbers the force was impressive—but in practice it was

well-nigh impossible to keep control of it and co-ordinate its efforts. In addition to several squadrons of the 8th Cavalry Regiment and support from both field and anti-aircraft artillery troops, the 1st and 3rd Battalions of the Burma Defence Army were placed under command, while out on the fringe and to the west of the defended area operated elements of Force 136.

Force 136, for so long a law unto itself, had done magnificent work in Burma prior to the reappearance of the Allied forces, but they held a mild contempt for regularly organized units. They were wisely used in a limited capacity as a screen of forward 'eyes', and as such were able to continue their cloak and dagger work.

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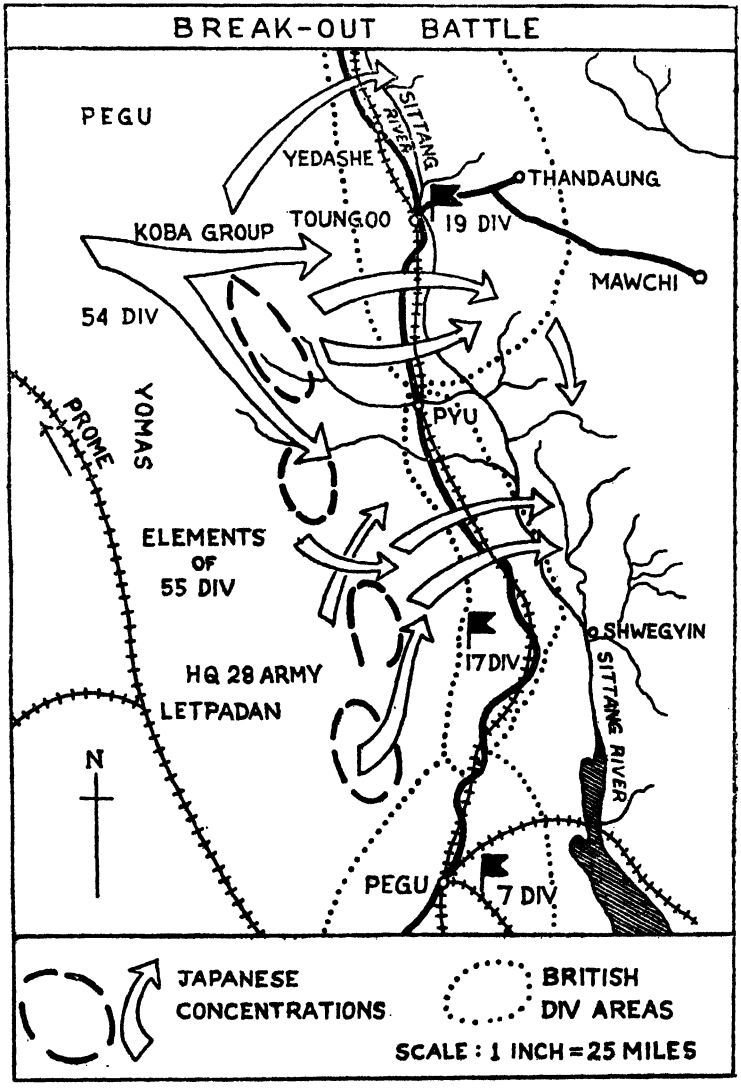
The Battle of the Break-out was the crowning disaster for the Japanese in Burma. After a remarkable withdrawal into the Pegu Yomas, when artillery and supplies were manhandled all the way, the greater part of 54th and 55th Japanese Divisions, comprising all that now remained of 28th Japanese Army, concentrated between Pegu in the south and Toungoo in the north for the final desperate dash across the Sittang to the safety of the mountainous border regions of Siam.

All the forces lined up to bar and frustrate this escape kept continually on the alert. From Yedashe patrols scoured the Battalion front and often, when the severe monsoon conditions allowed, they had armoured car protection. Each report from the forward screen of listening posts manned by the irregular troops was followed up and investigated. Many of the ambushes laid were abortive as a result of faulty or late information, but other patrols had successes and a trickle of prisoners began to flow into the Yedashe base.

On 25 June, a severe blow was struck at the escaping Japanese columns. Information was received from Burma Defence Army sources indicating that a large party of Japa-

nese had crossed the main road some 17 miles north of Yedashe and were preparing to cross the Sittang. A dismounted patrol sent out by the 8th Cavalry to follow up the reprot was



surrounded and unfortunately lost its patrol commander amongst several other casualties. Thus only the barest information concerning the Japanese strength and intentions was available. Major Lloyd Jones, temporarily in command of C Company, was sent out to intercept and engage the party. In the meantime, A Company was held in reserve on the main road, should it be required.

C Company moved with all possible speed to the village of Ketku and arrived there at dusk. While the village itself was found to be clear, signs of the Japanese presence were located in the swamp land immediately to the north. Sounds of raft making were clearly audible from within the thick elephant grass covering of the swamp. This in itself revealed the party's intentions and the probable area selected for the river crossing.

The Company Commander, appreciating the situation, wisely counted on the surprise of an ambush and, therefore, placed his forces on a commanding stretch of the west bank of the swiftly flowing river and south of where the Japanese were most likely to cross, after having warned the Burma Defence Army troops on the east bank of his plan and asking for their co-operation. In the fading light of evening, the vigil began. Later, moonlight shimmered on the rain-swollen river as the watch continued.

The Japanese behaved exactly as had been anticipated, and began crossing at roughly 2030 hours in about 20country boats and rafts. As this improvised fleet approached the east bank, the Burmese troops opened fire with every weapon at their disposal and the Japanese were forced to hold off. C Company meanwhile played out its waiting game, silent and concealed. The Japanese, having failed to get on to the east bank, now attempted to land further down-stream and in clear moonlight floated directly across the ambush. When the range had closed to barely 60 yards, rifles and automatics at last broke the silence and poured deadly fire into the cumbersome river craft as they passed across the position, and continued to sink the boats and massacre their occupants until the rafts disappeared from view. Few of this first party had escaped.

Two hours later, a second party attempted to follow in spite of the opposition encountered by the first and was dealt with by C Company with even more devastating results. Scores of casualties were inflicted and several large rafts sunk, while the night was made horrible by the screechings of the Japanese and the noise of battle. Those who did manage to run the gauntlet and land at a point 200 yards down-stream on the other bank were still not out of trouble, as many were wiped out by most accurate 2-inch mortar fire directed by Subedar Kapthuama Lushai. Every man had behaved magnificently during this dramatic action which had depended on coolness, patience and fire-discipline.

Out of the originally estimated number of 500 Japanese, observation on the spot put their casualty rate in killed and drowned at over 300. Reports received from prisoners taken afterwards supported this conclusion and 19th Indian Infantry Division Headquarters reported that military policemen on the Sittang bridge at Toungoo had seen Japanese corpses floating down the flooded river in large numbers after the action.

This successful ambush was followed up four days later when it was suspected that some of the Japanese had remained in the swamp land near Ketku. The Mortar Platoon, mounted on railway wagons drawn by jeeps, was brought into action and laid down a heavy barrage of high explosive. Three more of the Japanese were flushed and captured by Burma Defence Army troops waiting on the edge of the swamp. When the Battalion carried out a sweep of the area no further signs of the Japanese were found.

The Japanese activity increased considerably during the weeks that followed but, apart from reports that Jemadar Bana Lushai and Havildar Dilhu Angami had done much good work while with 64th Brigade in its battle up the Mawchi road, the Battalion had few successes of note. The next big engagement took place on 27 July near Yedashe and was a perfect set piece battle. It was also the last action which the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment fought before the end of hostilities in Burma.

SUBEDAR KAPTHUAMA LUSHAI

[*Facing page 210*

forced to split up into small isolated parties, and as such were extremely vulnerable in the systematic mopping up operations which were now put in hand. During the next few days, the total casualties inflicted on the Japanese rose by a further 12 and in addition, two more prisoners were taken.

One party of five, armed with a machine-gun, was discovered near the banks of the river. Here Lance-Naik Yambhamo Lotha again distinguished himself when, after two of his comrades had been killed and a third man wounded, he charged the Japanese and wiped out all five of them.

This small but brilliantly conducted operation reflected great credit on the Commanding Officer and all ranks of the Battalion and served to demonstrate the high pitch of efficiency the unit had now attained. At the cost of only two killed and three wounded, severe casualties had been inflicted on the Japanese and the entire group smashed up beyond hope of reformation. The fine manner in which the companies had manoeuvred made a great impression on the Regimental Centre Commander, who returned to Shillong convinced of the fighting worth of the men both he and his officers had been training with such care and effort.

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By 4 August, the battle was mainly over. Few of the Japanese had been fortunate enough to run the gauntlet successfully and reach the east bank of the Sittang. Official despatches summarized the casualties to both sides as follows:

> 'Between the 20th July and the 4th August, the enemy lost 6,271 killed and counted (of whom 3,200 were claimed by the guerrillas); while our own casualties in the same period were 97 killed and 322 wounded. The battle had been notable for the number of Japanese taken prisoner: 740. On the 24th July alone, when 829 of the enemy were killed on the 4th Corps front, 122

> prisoners had been taken: a proportion of one in seven, compared with that of one in a hundred in the early days of 1944.'

So the war drew on to its close. In early August, atomic bombs were dropped on the Japanese mainland cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And on 14 August, Japan accepted unconditional surrender. In Burma, General Kimura, commander of the Japanese Burma Area Army, was ordered to cease hostilities immediately, but in some areas the local Japanese commanders showed no signs of complying with or even knowing about these instructions. This led to 19th Indian Infantry Division message:

> 'No cease fire yet but provocative and harassing operations will be discontinued forthwith. Full military precautions will however continue to be taken.'

With so many of the Japanese formations out of touch with their parent headquarters, local commanders still refused to credit the news of the capitulation and clashes with the Japanese, therefore, continued until the end of the month along the whole front.

On 13 September Major-General Ichida, Assistant Chief of Staff to General Kimura, formally surrendered all Japanese forces in Burma to Brigadier E. F. E. Armstrong, Brigadier General Staff, Twelfth Army, in Rangoon.

The 1st Battalion Assam Regiment, as also did so many units in Burma at this time, found itself widely dispersed and took effective precautions for the safety of its personnel while waiting for the final cease fire. No celebrations followed the surrender announcement until all standing patrols were able to close on the Yedashe base.

Weary but with the full knowledge of a job well done, platoons and companies marched in, and four continuous years of active campaigning were ended. But joy turned to sorrow when in a sad accident a sepoy was killed by an exploding grenade inside one of D Company barrack rooms. At the same time several other men were injured.

Sad as this tragic and costly accident was, the jubilant spirit of all ranks could not be subdued for long. Talk was all of leave and reunion with the families from which they had been separated for too long, and, at last, everyone could get really clean and rested. The climax of the Battalion's existence had been reached — it had travelled far and known many adversities and bitter moments, but the officers and men amongst its ranks could look back with pride on the achievements of the past years. From the first to the last, the great cause which had brought about the Allied conflict with Japan and to which the Regiment had been dedicated on a bright June morning in far away Shillong had been served loyally and well.

CHAPTER XIII

THE POST-WAR PERIOD — I

IT IS a common belief that when the last shot is fired the soldier's task is ended. Actually, the less positive, but by no means insignificant side of his responsibility can only get into its stride when the din of battle has finally died away. Perhaps his task in the normal course of events could be classified as two-fold. First, he must fight to restore peace, then he must safeguard peace by behaviour so impeccable as to leave the unsettled and politically unruly no excuse for resentment or revolt. He must in fact be both an example and warning.

The end of hostilities in Burma found the Assam Regiment barely four years old and its two active wings widely separated — the 1st Battalion in Burma and the 2nd Battalion in a training area in Assam. The Regiment, as a whole, was completely devoid of any real experience of peacetime soldiering and had, of course, yet to establish itself as a regular unit of the Indian Army. This was in itself by no means a certainty, but it was hoped that Assam would be allowed to retain its wartime Regiment. This hope was further strengthened when it was learnt that General Headquarters in Delhi planned to go ahead with raising a third battalion of the Regiment in November 1945.

During its short life the Assam Regiment had, through the achievements of the 1st Battalion, gone a long way to forging a tradition of courage and efficiency on the battle-field. Now it was called on to prove its ability to adapt itself to the changing circumstances of the post-war period and conform with accepted peacetime practices. That the Regiment did indeed manage this transition with little difficulty, is a great tribute primarily to the versatility of the men and to the few regular officers then serving with it.

We must now trace in the aftermath of the war the development of the Regiment and the part it was to play during a period made all the more difficult because the Far East, (India and Burma included), was passing through turbulent times and was on the threshold of events of momentous importance. It was a period of great political activity and striving for power, but the Regiment, following the example of its more illustrious Indian Army colleagues, did not concern itself in any way with politics, but went steadily ahead, carrying out the duties allotted to it and completing its task of reorganization. The future activities of the Regiment can, therefore, be recorded objectively, against the essential background of political and national aspirations.

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The Burma of 1945 was a vastly different country from the pleasant, carefree land of pre-war years. The thousands of pagodas with their tinkling bells, gold and vermilion spires, and multitudes of saffron robed attendants, had become drab and decayed. Armies had fought viciously across the emarald paddy-fields and through the neat villages during the past four years, bringing in their wake destruction and chaos. A huge refugee problem now existed in every township, and amongst the squalor of broken-down shacks, which housed these many homeless and destitute people, conditions were ideal for epidemics of cholera and smallpox. Indeed, cases of bubonic plague had been reported in some districts.

When hostilities ceased, the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was centred on Yedashe, and here the unit remained for the next six months while it gradually switched its tempo from the roughness and toughness of war to the slower rhythm of peacetime 'spit and polish'. Yedashe was only a small town, of perhaps no more than 800 houses, full of casual, gaily dressed Burmese living alongside sharp businesslike Chinese and a smaller Indian community. It was typical

of many Burmese townships along the main rail and river routes throughout the country. The crowds that strolled in the sunlit bazaar seemed impervious to the squalor and filth around them. And so they might well have continued had not Lieutenant-Colonel Parsons and his Medical Officer, Captain S. K. Dev, revolted against such conditions and set out to do something about them.

Civil Administration had not yet been re-established in Burma at this time and the Commanding Officer felt unable to stand idly by and not help the townsfolk rehabilitate themselves. It seemed necessary to try and impress on the leaders of the community the urgency of some return to sanitary and hygienic arrangements as much in defence of the troop's health as in the interests of town management.

The campaign opened with the formation of a Township Committee, representing all three communities and set up under the chairmanship of Lieutenant-Colonel Parsons. The bland smiles of its members, however, belied their enthusiasm for the project. Every suggestion was acclaimed and agreed on unanimously — then they all went away to do nothing whatsoever about it. One major achievement was the construction, under guidance of the battalion, of communal latrines. But these rows of military camp-like buildings never found favour with the sedately shy Burmese, and they stood deserted after a few days.

More success appeared to have been achieved by the Medical Officer and the Quartermaster, Captain Straw in their clean food campaign in the bazaar. But the cynics of the Battalion took the view that the efficiency of the local grapevine and bush telegraph was really responsible for the orderliness of the bazaar whenever these two officers made an inspection! Certainly the polite Burmese did their best to humour the whims of their self-appointed tutors.

In other more general ways the Battalion was much more successful. The people of Yedashe and the surrounding country soon learnt to trust our men and look on them as upholders of law and order. It may have been the fearsome spectacle of the Commanding Officer in a football match

between the battalion and a local side ordering off the field several young Burmese, before finally abandoning the match, that fully convinced the townsfolk of this, but it was a fact that the battalion's help was enlisted on many occasions.

In the unsettled conditions of the country at that time many ex-convicts and malcontents, including disbanded soldiers, had set themselves against the law. Some had acquired guns and ammunition abandoned during the fighting and were holding large areas of the countryside to ransom. Notorious dacoits of former years now began to reappear in widely scattered places. In the west amongst the mountain ridges of the Arakan, a new kingdom came into being and in the less accessible parts of central Burma a similar lawless situation threatened. It was, therefore, not very long before the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was called on to go out and chase some of the nearer dacoit gangs.

On two occasions strong mobile parties were sent out after terrifying reports had been received about dacoits, but the men soon realized that the Burmese always wildly exaggerated and that their guides were nearly always unreliable. So, although the operations were undertaken goodheartedly and with spirit, the war was too lately over for the troops to take them too seriously. The topics of the day were more concerned with when the next leave party would be able to get away, or whether the Assam Regiment would be incorporated as a regular unit of the Indian Army. Officers and men were also busy settling down to peacetime soldiering and preparing for such things as divisional sports meetings and later for the Dagger Division Searchlight Tattoo.

This tatoo was held in November, in the ruins of the old Toungoo fort, and every unit of the Division was represented in the programme. Kukis, Assamese, Nagas and Lushais in their turn performed in costume their tribal songs and dances to the delight of crowded audiences. This was the culmination of weeks of practice and rehearsal under Captain Thenphunga Sailo, who had been appointed the Battalion's concert supervisor. During the *finale*, the performers strode

into the arena to the strains of their various regimental marches. The 1st Battalion had not at this time yet adopted '*Kan zoram tlang nuam*' — How beautiful is my country — and so on this occasion the tune 'Wish Me Luck', a great favourite amongst the men, was played. Performed by the Duke of Aosta's band it proved a great success.

Later that month, Lieutenant-Colonel Parsons set off back to India with a leave party by way of the Chindwin and Manipur. That route was no longer in normal use but they reached Assam safely and thus avoided the bottle-neck at Rangoon. Command of the Battalion was now assumed by Major D. H. Mappin, who had recently arrived as Second-in-Command.

Another new arrival was one 'Badluram'. He was the creation of Major Mervyn Procter and grew in stature and popularity until he became the best known and loved of all sepoys in the Assam Regiment. 'Badluram ka badan zamin ke niche hai', so went the new words to the old tune of 'John Brown's Body'. It was a lament and also a rejoicing for it continued:

'Shabash Alleluia!
To ham ko uska ration milta hai'.

So on the concert platform also the Regiment was building up a tradition. 'Badluram' and 'O Di' and the Negro Dance were always essential items whenever a Battalion 'nautch' was staged, as were the more knock-about turns by the officers and other established comedians.

Then the time came, Christmas and the New Year being past, for the Battalion to be on the move again and the quiet backwater life of Yedashe came to a close. The unit was to take the road on many occasions before finally leaving Burma in 1947. Sometimes it returned to places first seen as part of the battlefield and sometimes it went to places with entirely new names and scenery. This time, the road led to the small hill town of Kalaw amidst the pine forests of the southern Shan States.

Kalaw proved to be a very pleasant part of Burma, but

no sooner had the camp started to take shape, than the Battalion was ordered to move again. This was sad and disappointing news, for much care and time had been lavished on such things as the Regimental Institute and Canteen, besides laying out most attractive lines.

This time the Battalion was to move to Meiktila, and a few days later the camp was handed over to old friends of Mandalay Hill fame, the 4th Battalion 4th Gorkha Rifles. Off the Battalion went, away from the cool freshness of the pine-clad Kalaw hills to the dry heat of Burma's arid zone, where the lakes around Meiktila were little oases of green against a bare, drab background. The town itself was still a mass of ruins and rubble and very dirty, but bustling with military activity.

Meiktila was to be only another staging place for the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment. The army in Burma was at that time being reorganized and the Battalion was now told to take up temporary quarters until it was allotted to a permanent formation. 19th Indian Infantry Division Headquarters was scheduled to return to India but certain of its battalions would remain behind to garrison post-war Burma. These units were transferred to the command of 17th Indian Infantry Division, under Major-General W. A. Crowther, C.B.E., D.S.O. It was with great pleasure that the Battalion heard a short while later that it was to become part of Brigadier Flewett's 64th Brigade. The Brigadier was an old friend and he was immensely popular when he announced his intention of sending the Battalion to Maymyo, where it would become static for a while so that it could get down to training again.

Before this move could take place, however, an awkward situation arose in northern Burma which the Battalion, with others, was ordered to prepare to deal with. At the time hostilities with Japan ceased a large number of Chinese troops occupied extensive areas of the Shan States and Kachin Hills. These troops had shown no inclination to return to their own country even when later requested to do so by the newly reconstituted Government of Burma. It, therefore, became

more and more probable that military action would have to be taken to eject them.

The 1st Battalion Assam Regiment prepared to fly in to Bhamo in Upper Burma. Men and stores had to be arranged in flight loads. This was something entirely new to the men but they did not seem to worry and soon mastered the rather complicated drill of emplaning into the Dakotas waiting ready on the airfield. Soon everything was ready and the Battalion waited to see what would hapen as a result of the ultimatum to the Chinese to quit Burma. Neither politicians nor generals were anxious to precipitate military action against our former ally and all hoped that sense and reason would prevail. Fortunately, the firm stand taken by the Government had its reward. A few hours before the time limit expired, the Chinese were reported to be on the move eastwards.

The stand-down was received with some measure of relief in the Battalion for many key men, officers and non-commissioned officers were absent from the unit on leave. The 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was now released from its emergency role and free to move to Maymyo. By mid-March, the unit had once again completed a major move and was busy clearing the jungle to make yet another camp for itself.

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Maymyo, the summer capital of Burma, was a delightful station with a long history of peacetime military garrisons behind it. In 1946, it was looking rather shabby and desolate but the town had escaped severe bombing during the war and the main cause for dilapidation apart from looting during the years of occupation was the great mass of tangled vegetation which had invaded the entire area. The Royal Worcesters occupied the only proper barracks, so the Battalion was allotted an area of former parkland, in which during the Japanese occupation, scrubby jungle and lentana bushes had been allowed to run riot. It took several weeks before order could be restored there—indeed the scrub was so thick that

it was a long time before it was discovered that a tennis court lay only a short distance from the new officers' mess.

Generous assistance was received from Brigade Headquarters and the camp, which now gradually took shape, became the first really comfortable place the Battalion had occupied since it had left Shillong to begin its adventures in 1941. Bulldozers were employed to prepare Motor Transport and Mule lines and when this work was done, the Commanding Officer persuaded the engineer company to use the machines to level out an area set aside for a football pitch. Later, amidst scenes of great excitement, the troops watched the Battalion team defeat the 1st Battalion 6th Gorkha Rifles from Mandalay.

Then on a more serious note they turned to training, both in the companies and on the many cadres that Lieutenant-Colonel Parsons had now started on a battalion basis. It was during this industrious period that the Battalion was called out to restore law and order in the Shwebo district, which had become the scene of a series of dacoit outrages.

On 29 April Major A. E. C. Pascoe, M.C., who had recently joined the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment after serving with the Lushai Scouts, took A Company down to Mandalay and then across the Irrawaddy to investigate and report on the situation there. A few days later the whole unit, under Major Mappin, left Maymyo to begin a series of operations which took it from Sagaing to Shwebo and then on to Monywa.

It was a time of constant movement back and forth as scattered parties and patrols searched villages for illegal arms and endeavoured to round up suspected dacoits with the help of the local police. Ambushes were laid at night, and anyone travelling the road after dark was stopped and interrogated. The men were told to forget that the war was over and to think of the operation as a battle exercise.

The countryside was dry and very parched, and the weather was extremely hot. It was a tedious operation with few, if any, tangible results for a great deal of effort expended. It was, however, a useful show of strength in a lawless area

and it showed that troops were not far away and would return if trouble again broke out. Lieutenant-Colonel Parsons, then Officiating Brigade Commander, exploited the situation to the full to begin training the Battalion in a role which it was to be increasingly called on to fulfil, and thus many useful lessons were learnt on the Shwebo plain.

As had been experienced during the war, communications were foul away from the main road, rail and river lines, and in this particular region were almost impossible for motor vehicles. This meant that the work had mainly to be done on foot and led to trouble on the few occasions when trucks were used. One night a strong patrol set out to raid a troublesome village but as the motor convoy moved slowly along a narrow canal bank leading to the village, one of the 3-tonners toppled over and plunged down into a ditch. One man was killed and another two were seriously injured. To make matters worse, the dacoits chose that moment to arrive on the scene and begin sniping at the halted column. They were soon dispersed, however, once their fire was returned and a section went off in pursuit of the dacoits.

After a month of dacoit hunting the operation came to an end. As the Battalion moved back to its cool camp among the pines at Maymyo, it received a message of thanks from the civil authorities at Shwebo. It could look back on a month of hard work but one which was not without its lighter side; above all it had been given an opportunity to get to know the people of Burma better, under less exacting conditions than active campaigning.

On 15 June, the Regiment celebrated its fifth anniversary. On the parade ground at Maymyo the Divisional Commander inspected the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment.

Later in the evening, a full scale 'nautch' was performed in the unit lines to which many distinguished guests, including the Governor's family, were invited. Immediately afterwards, the Battalion was introduced to another form of peacetime commitment which, through the ages, has fallen to the lot of military forces, that of fighting famine and bringing relief and comfort to unfortunate people.

War had prevented the hill people of the Shan States from cultivating their fields in the spring of 1945. Now in the following year food was scarce and famine stalked the border region around Lashio and the Upper Shweli country.

'Operation Hunger' took place under circumstances with which the men of the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment could sympathize. They knew only too well what failure of the rice harvest could mean to their own hills and appreciated the urgency of bringing relief to the starving people. They set about their task with zest and enthusiasm, sparing neither themselves nor the motor columns they were to guard during the weeks that followed.

Lieutenant L. N. Kumar De left Maymyo on 21 June with Subedar Umesh Chandra Mech and 60 men of B Company and moved up the Lashio road to make their headquarters at the village of Naungakio. There they took over responsibility for guarding the civil supply dump, which a harassed District Officer had been trying to manage almost single handed up to this time. A small detachment of ten men was sent further up the road to Lashio itself to carry out similar duties at the subsidiary dump there.

For the next month, these men went out daily with the supply columns deeper and deeper into the famine affected areas and received the gratitude of the people for their Good Samaritan deeds and cheerful ways. Some of the places they visited were not pretty sights but they had no time to linger on such matters. It was hard but intensely rewarding work. Never was it more forcefully brought home to all those taking part in the operation how comparatively fortunate was the lot of the soldier and how easily he could become the respected ambassador of his country in a foreign land.

The war had been over now for almost a year and it was inevitable that many of the officers and men should be looking forward to their release from the army. But it was with sorrow that the Battalion had to bid goodbye to ever increasing numbers of old comrades. First to go from amongst the 'old-stagers' was Major Williamson, who left

while the unit was still at Yedashe. He was followed by Captain Straw and Major Calistan. Then Major Lloyd Jones handed over command of D Company to Major Amar Sen, who joined the 1st Battalion at Yedashe in August 1945 after serving with the 2nd Battalion for several years. All these officers and men who were now leaving had served the Regiment well, often with distinction, and none left without many happy memories and perhaps not a little heart-ache. Certainly, all the officers throughout their campaigning together had worked as a friendly team, and each one of them was devotedly attached to the troops he had led into battle, as they were to him.

Those viceroy's commissioned officers and men remaining behind still looked forward to being allowed to stay on, should the Assam Regiment be retained as a regular unit of the post-war Indian Army. In the few short months following its arrival in Maymyo, the Battalion had knitted itself into a sound efficient unit prepared to challenge all comers, be it all skill-at-arms or on the playing fields. It was, therefore, with great pride and satisfaction that it was learned a short while later that General Headquarters had brought about the Regiment's dearest wish — its retention in the Regular Army. Post-war planning could go ahead in earnest now that this great landmark in the history of the Regiment had been achieved.

In September, the Battalion changed places with the 1st Battalion 6th Gorkha Rifles and moved to occupy Fort Dufferin in Mandalay. It soon became caught up there in local political disturbances, for an ugly mood had settled over Mandalay and a general strike appeared imminent. Worst of all, the city's police forces were expected to join in. The Battalion prepared to take over control of the city, should the strike materialize and battle stations were allotted to the rifle companies. But, as is so often the case, political tempers proved fickle, and in the end the only people to strike were the prisoners in the local jail. Tension relaxed everywhere and life in the bazaar area returned to its usual, casual gaiety.

In the middle of the strike threat, a local football championship took place and the Battalion proved popular winners when it defeated the Mandalay Police on their home ground and carried off the Mandalay Ruby Cup. Many held the view that if the Battalion could soundly defeat the police at football, then the outcome of the strike was no longer in doubt.

As the disturbances in Mandalay died away, news came in of fresh troubles in the Pokokku area and also further inland on the west bank of the Irrawaddy. New political parties were emerging almost every day in Burma at this time, ranging from the Red Flag and White Flag Communist parties to reactionary individuals who aspired to independent kingdoms of their own. The situation was said to be serious and 1st Battalion Assam Regiment was ordered to go and put the matter right.

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'Operation Rhino', as these operations were called, began on 10 October, when Major Amar Sen and the advance party left Mandalay for Meiktila and thence made their way westwards to the oil town of Chauk to await the arrival of the main body. The operation was to be the biggest of its kind yet attempted by the Government of Burma and much depended on the way it would be carried out. To assist him, Lieutenant-Colonel Parsons was given additional troops in the shape of a company of the 2nd Chin Rifles and the 8th (Mahratta) Anti-Tank Regiment acting in an infantry role.

As its primary objective, the Battalion was to march on the besieged township of Saw tucked away in the foothills near to the Indian frontier. Saw later achieved eminence in the world news when its relief and recapture was announced on the radio.

By 14 October, the complete unit had crossed the Irrawaddy and had assembled at Seikpyu on the west bank. Here, a rear base was set up and the operation swung into

motion. C and D Companies pushed up the rough track towards Saw but did not get very far before being held up by flooded chaungs. However, such obstacles had been encountered before and, although some stores and kits were lost in the process of crossing over, the two companies made the other bank. The Commanding Officer was in the meantime flying over Saw in a light plane looking for the best line of approach for his troops. On the ground, the Battalion column moved on fast, the Chins closed in from the south and the Mahrattas came down from the north.

The countryside seemed peaceful enough but rumours of banditry were rife and the local Superintendent of Police urged all possible speed and effort to capture the would-be king of Saw, a ruthless criminal named Aung Thint. By 24 October, after some hard marching by the Battalion column, C Company, called 'Procforce', had surrounded the dacoit stronghold at Laungshe, a few miles from Saw and had pressed on to link up with the Chins and Mahrattas. Meanwhile D Company, called 'Senforce', cleared the township of Saw.

The rebels showed little resistance and they melted away before the encircling forces. Their ranks were finally split when the leaders of the Red Flag Cultivators Union made overtures to the government officers with the Battalion and offered to co-operate in restoring law and order in the area. Saw was thus relieved and perhaps a nasty situation averted, but we learned that the deciding factor which broke Aung Thint's will to fight it out had been the Commanding Officer's small plane flying over the town.

With much ceremony and palaver, arms and ammunition were collected and handed over by the villagers, while several unsavoury but wanted characters were picked up by the police and taken into custody. A substantial armoury of military and country-made weapons was gathered. In addition, 39 suspected dacoits captured. Thus the first phase of 'Operation Rhino' came to an end. The Battalion column moved back towards Seikpyu once Saw was pacified and went off to join B Company further north. In that area, reports

left no doubt that dacoity and disorder were widespread. The villagers were afraid to move about the district and were bewildered by the many acts of terrorism. As soon as our forces arrived, they eagerly offered their full cooperation and the second phase of 'Operation Rhino' now opened.

During this phase, which lasted until mid-December, the rifle companies were spread over a wide area to the north of Seikpyu. Patrols scoured the district and constantly moved in on villages to search for arms and suspected gangsters. This was all done in close liaison with the police and our men soon became quite expert at this type of work, besides thoroughly enjoying being back in the jungle and away from irksome guards and duties of a peace station.

They witnessed also the lengths to which representatives of law and order are sometimes forced to go when they were ordered to destroy two unrepentant villages, whose inhabitants were accused of harbouring and succouring dacoits, by burning them to the ground. From the ashes of one of these villages, an alabaster image of the Buddha was rescued by D Company and kept as a memento of the Seikpyu dacoit operations. This magnificent image was later presented to the Assam Regiment Centre Officers' Mess for its permanent home.

As the unit now returns to Mandalay, let the following messages of commendation speak for themselves as tributes to the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment's achievements in post-war Burma:

> Government of Burma (Home Department)
> Memorandum No. 291 HD 46 (2390) dated 9.1.1947
> "It has been brought to the notice of the Government of Burma that the 1st Battalion of the Assam Regiment recently stationed in the Saw and Seikpyu townships of the Pakokku district has been engaged over a period of two months in intensive anti-dacoit operations under difficult monsoon conditions. As a result, largely of these operations, the district is now again quiet. It is particularly gratifying that this satisfactory result has been obtained without the firing of a single shot.

It is desired, therefore, to place on record the gratitude of the Government for the magnificent work and commendable restraint of this unit in performing its duties in aid of the Civil Power in the Pakokku district and to request that the thanks of the Government may be conveyed to the Commanding Officer and all ranks of the Battalion.'

and:

From Brigadier J. G. Flewett, D.S.O.,
Commanding 64th Indian Infantry Brigade

'Will you please accept and convey to all ranks of your battalion my best congratulations on the excellent work you carried out during Operation Rhino recently concluded in the Pakokku district.

I have heard nothing but praise from the civil officials of the manner in which the operation was planned by you and so skilfully carried out by your men, often under difficult conditions. It is also very gratifying to hear of the close and cordial co-operation which existed between your unit and the civil officials throughout, and of the esteem of your men held by the locals wherever you operated.

You have done a fine job of work, thereby enhancing your own reputation and the good name of 64th Brigade.

Well done.'

★ ★ ★ ★

Back in Fort Dufferin, the Battalion settled down again to training courses and cadres. Outside, there was much speculation concerning the future of the British and Indian garrison forces in Burma, for the country was soon to achieve complete national independence and already Burmese nationals were taking over command of the reformed Burma Rifles and other Burma Army units. It was, therefore, with no surprise that the Battalion learned towards the end of February that it was to be withdrawn from Burma and sent back to India. This took place in the following month and with it came to an end the Battalion's happy association with 64th Indian Infantry Brigade. The journey started by train

when the unit left Mandalay for Rangoon. The news of the impending move and that the Battalion was to travel to Calcutta on a troopship had caused much excitement. Up to this time, few of the men had ever seen the sea and fewer still had been aboard a ship. One can only guess at the wondrous tales which were later told to admiring audiences back in the sheltered villages of Assam.

The 1st Battalion's farewell to Mandalay was one of action. While most of the men were busy packing up stores and kits and loading them into the train ready for departure the next day, Jemadar Durgaram Mech was routing out a gang of dacoits in the heart of the city. An attempt to murder the Superintendent of Police, Mr. Edwards, had started a city-wide man-hunt. This finally ended when a group of notorious dacoits were surrounded by the police in a pongyi kyaung a short distance from the bazaar centre. In answer to the police call for help, Jemadar Durgaram Mech was sent out with a motley collection of men, mostly from cook-house fatigue parties, to the scene of the crime.

The dacoits opened fire on our troops as they closed in and Durgaram then wasted no more time. His men went into the attack firing from the hip while a bren-gun made the dacoits keep their heads down. Six of the desperadoes were killed when a hail of bullets ripped through the flimsy wooden building and another was wounded. An eighth man escaped through a window but, unfortunately, for him, he was in such a hurry that he failed to see an open well in the monastery compound and disappeared down it head first. On being retrieved alive by Durgaram's men, he was found to be the leader of the gang, a much 'wanted' criminal known as the 'Sunflower of North Burma'.

The police were delighted with the result of the operation and gathered from the pongyi kyaung a veritable arsenal of guns and ammunition.

The next day, the Battalion was rattling down to Rangoon in old and battered rolling stock. Every bridge along the entire length of the route had been blasted during the war and it was an achievement that the railway should have

been operating at all. At Pyinmana, the unit was warmly greeted by the officers and men of the 1st Battalion 7th Gorkha Rifles with whom great friendship existed — and rivalry, for the football score stood at one match each and the deciding game had yet to be played. But now that match would never take place, at any rate in Burma.

The following morning, the train puffed laboriously into the ruins of Rangoon station. Tired and dirty, the troops viewed with horror their proposed camping site which looked more like a municipal rubbish dump than the beauty spot it had once been before the war. Great efforts to make the camp habitable were made and, by the time the Battalion's embarkation orders came, the Royal Lakes camp was once again clean and tidy.

Before it finally left Burma, however, the Battalion had to overcome one more trial. After it had embarked all its stores on the waiting troopship, orders were suddenly received that the unit could not be released just then from its security duties. After leaving the ship again, the Battalion moved out to the transit camp at Insein and later stood by, in case any riots broke out on polling day during the first General Election to be held in independent Burma on 1 April. This change of plan was not much appreciated but the men showed commendable forebearance and retained their habitual cheerfulness.

Four weeks later the Battalion said a final farewell and quit Burma. General Aung San and his Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League had taken over the reins of government in the country and all seemed quiet and peaceful. There had been no rioting or disturbances during the elections and now after embarking on the troopship '*Talma*', the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment watched the golden spire of the famous Shwe Dagon pagoda gradually fade into the distance as the ship sailed out to the open sea down the Rangoon river.

On the eve of the Battalion's departure, after serving continuously in operational areas for five years, a message was received from Lieutenant-General Sir Harold Briggs of Burma Command saying:

> 'Your forebearance and military ability have earned you the respect and the highest praise of the Government of Burma. India will be as happy and proud at your return as I am sorry to see you go.'

So, proud and happy indeed, the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment set out on its way home to Shillong. In the words of a very senior general it had done 'a surprisingly magnificent job in Burma'.

CHAPTER XIV

THE POST-WAR PERIOD — II

THE SAME problems of peacetime reorganization which had faced the 1st Battalion in Burma at the end of the war had to be overcome by the 2nd Battalion and, to a lesser degree, by the Regimental Training Centre. The 3rd Battalion, raised on 1 November 1945, alone had the advantage of starting on its peacetime career unhampered by habits and notions picked up during the war. It was able to plan its development properly, without having to relate its speed of progress to the pressing needs of the contemporary emergency, as its two predecessors had had to do.

The task of reorganizing the three units in India was, in some measure, made easier because they were grouped closely together in Assam. In July 1945, the 2nd Battalion had left South India, and, under a new Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel J. F. R. Woodhouse, from the 10th Baluch Regiment, had moved up to the Gauhati area, where it went into camp on the bank of the Brahmaputra River. It had originally been intended that the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment should move right up to the Burma border and be available for active service with one of the divisions, had the fighting continued in that theatre. The unit was again, however, fated not to join the active front and all hope of doing so was finally killed when the Japanese capitulated in the following August. But this situation could be now better borne since the Battalion was back in its own province and the men did not feel so utterly cut off from their homes and families. The new Commanding Officer was a youthful and forceful personality who quickly injected enthusiasm into his troops, even though the nature of their training remained much the same as before.

In Shillong, the 3rd Battalion Assam Regiment began to establish itself at a comfortable pace. When its Commanding

Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel F. R. S. Cosens, D.S.O., O.B.E., arrived after relinquishing command of the 14th Gorkha Rifles, which was the combined Advanced Training Unit of the 1st and 4th Gorkhas at Dehra Dun, the first stage of raising, which aimed at organizing viceroy's commissioned officers and non-commissioned officers in groups on which further intakes could be based, was almost completed. Much of the initial work had been done by Lieutenant-Colonel Madge of the Training Centre, who had made it his personal responsibility that only the very best of his recruits should be posted to the new Battalion. Both the 1st and 2nd Battalions also gave generously and some very fine officers and men — many of whom had been decorated for gallantry — were sent from Burma and Gauhati.

After remaining for about two months at the initial stage of its development the 3rd Battalion Assam Regiment, having received fresh drafts of men from the Training Centre, began to assume an identity of its own. To begin with, training was designed to concentrate on building up platoon, company and eventually Battalion *esprit-de-corps*, so that the many strangers in it could feel that they 'belonged'. They concentrated on 'spit and polish', particularly in the combination of smartness and efficiency of the guards which the Battalion had to provide in and around Happy Valley and Shillong. Under such officers as Major Sidhiman Rai, M.C., from the 1st Battalion, Major W.B. Kelly, D.C.M., M.M., from the 2nd Battalion and the new Subedar-Major Khagendra Nath Gogoi, M.C., also from the 1st Battalion, the men of the unit worked with a will and made up in enthusiasm what they lacked in experience. By March of the following year, when the 3rd Battalion Assam Regiment was inspected by the Commander-in-Chief, great progress had been made and Field Marshal Auchinleck expressed himself very satisfied with the state of the unit.

During April, the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment moved up to Shillong from Gauhati. It now had another new Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel C. W. Yeates, D.S.O., formerly of the 8th Gorkha Rifles who had taken

over command during the previous month. The unit was sandwiched between the Training Centre and the 3rd Battalion in Karen Lines and the men were very happy to be back in the hills in time to escape the steamy heat of the Assam Valley during the approaching monsoon months.

Both 2nd and 3rd Battalions now received instructions to start mountain warfare training, as it was envisaged that the first move either unit would make away from Shillong would be to the North-West Frontier. In addition, the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment was given an internal security role to perform, should any disturbances break out anywhere in Assam as a result of the initial negotiations then taking place in Delhi, negotiations which were to lead eventually to the withdrawal of British rule in India.

So throughout 1946, while the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment carried out two well organized and entirely peaceful flag marches in the main danger area of Sylhet, the 3rd Battalion was gradually finding its feet and feeling its strength. In the winter, the whole Battalion went into camp at Bara Pani and the Commanding Officer was able to put into practice there some of the principles and methods of frontier warfare that he had tried to instil into his men in the class-room.

On certain nights, general permission was given for companies to steal rifles and other arms, each from the other. This certainly kept the 'thieves', the patrols and the pickets on their toes, for any company which lost a weapon had to strip the following morning and wade through the icy river to the hoots of mirth from the remainder of the Battalion. Such indignity and discomfort soon made Company Commanders, who had to be first into the water, ensure that their men kept close guard on their arms.

By the end of the Bara Pani period, the Battalion was able to function with more than a semblance of efficiency, though it still lacked many specialists in the Signal and Mortar Platoons. Valuable reinforcements had now arrived, including Major Waheed Haider, the new Second-in-Command, a pre-war graduate from the Indian Military

Academy, and under him the training of Headquarter Company went ahead more quickly.

The Battalion was now a completely independent unit with its own character and was fast forming its own traditions. While all essential features of the Regiment, such as the avoidance of class companies and separate cook-houses, remained uniform throughout, the 3rd Battalion differred in small ways from the rest of the Regiment. Its flag was a black rhinoceros on an orange background, instead of the colours being the other way round, and its pugree flash was triangular as opposed to the square flash adopted by all other units of the Regiment.

On the sports field also, the Battalion spirit was being built up and soon the 3rd Battalion was a force to be reckoned with in Shillong inter-unit soccer and hockey leagues. Many a time, the 2nd and 3rd Battalions fought it out on the soccer pitch and from these hard fought battles grew friendly rivalry and a strong family bond.

Then suddenly in November of 1946, the 3rd Battalion Assam Regiment was left alone in Shillong with the Training Centre, while the 2nd Battalion went off on new adventures to the North-West Frontier.

* * * *

The officers and men of the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment who left Shillong early on that cold November morning had received the news of their impending move with something bordering on relief, having first got over the shock and suddenness of the orders. After the many frustrations experienced during their tour in South India and the more recent absurdity of their 'Grow more food' efforts, when they had all but turned from being soldiers to becoming market-gardeners around Shillong, everybody was glad to get away.

India's eastern frontier was quiet and purged of war. There could be no need for troops to operate there for a long time to come, but there still remained India's other

frontier in the north-west, turbulent as ever, which required to be manned by staunch men. Malakand, which was to be the Battalion's destination, was said, by old and knowledgeable frontiersmen, to be a paradise for shikaris and fishermen and that the local Pathans, although always armed to the teeth, did not give any trouble. Indeed Malakand had a tradition as an initiation station, welcoming raw battalions and introducing them gently to the rigors of frontier life and fitting them for more dangerous service elsewhere.

The journey across India was long and tedious, and required careful organization and much patience. But once Calcutta had been left behind and the train headed west across the Ganges plain there were new sights in plenty to hold the attention of the troops and in the excitement of it all they found much to interest them. Passing Banaras, Delhi and Lahore the train rattled through the parched fields of the Punjab taking them ever closer to the mountains of the frontier region, through to Rawalpindi and Nowshera.

On the morning of the sixth day the train at last drew to a halt and the name 'Dargai' was heard for the first time — the Battalion had arrived. As the men now detrained they were watched by a large crowd of silent tribesmen curious to know the identity of the newcomers. Without doubt some must have snorted and exclaimed that the troops were 'just another lot of Gorkhas' — and Hindus at that. Others probably were quick to point out that these 'infidels' were indeed peculiar for they wore a pig as their badge!

First away from Dargai was A Company, under Major M. G. Littlehales, for they were to go straight on past Malakand to Chakdara on the Swat river and occupy the fort located there. When the main Battalion party moved up, D Company, under Major K. J. Kiernan, remained behind at Dargai, the least pleasant of the three forts the Battalion was to occupy. During the days that followed the unit settled busily into its new home and took over its duties from the battalion of the Frontier Force Rifles which it had relieved at Malakand. Then the men were able to look about and savour their strange and fantastic surroundings.

Malakand occupies the crest of the pass over the mountains and dominates the only land route northwards from Nowshera to Swat State and beyond to Chitral. All around is typical frontier country with hills reaching to over 5000 feet above sea-level, bare with but scant covering of stunted vegetation. The walls of the parallel valleys on either side of the pass draw closer to each other and the sunlit peaks and jagged mass of rocks are only dimly seen through a haze of dazzling sun and dust. Far away to the north the western Himalayas can be seen pointing their snowclad fingers to the sky and in their midst lies the meeting place of India, Russia and China.

Bit by bit the officers and men learnt something of the history of Malakand. Lieutenant-Colonel Evelyn Cobb, O.B.E., the Political Agent at Malakand, was an old frontiersman and a well-known character about the area. He was also an amusing and interesting guide and instructor to whom the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment owes a great deal for the smoothness and pleasantness of the one and a half years they spent on the frontier. From him and the Commanding Officer they learnt that although Malakand in 1946 and for many years before that was quiet and peaceful and could be expected to remain a place noted for good shikar and fishing, it had not always been so. The massive walls and extensive proportions of the three forts and their surrounding pickets bore witness to this. Chakdara, ten miles away, had in 1897 been the centre of Saadulla, the Mad Mullah's uprising and attack. The story of the endurance and courage of the British and Indian troops in garrison there has been immortalized for us by Rudyard Kipling in his poem of how the Bhisti, Gunga Din, carried water through to the besieged on Signal Picket. Since that time Malakand, Chakdara and Dargai have been maintained and manned. The forts have grown through the years into something resembling walled towns, rather than the small isolated outposts they were originally, for besides the garrison forces large bazaars flourish and all manner of business is transacted within their walls. Only at sunset are all, except those

specially authorized to remain, expected to be outside the gates before they are banged shut for the night.

The Battalion soon got down to training and Lieutenant-Colonel Yeates and his Second-in-Command, Major Ahmed Jan, M.B.E., began instructing the men in the art of constructing sangars and in methods of picketing the way ahead of advancing columns. The hills that the troops now climbed and worked in were very different from those of their own districts in Assam, but they enjoyed the days around Malakand, hard as they were, and the general state of health in the unit was excellent. Besides training they had few duties other than looking to their own protection, for no columns were ever sent out from Malakand and the outposts ringed about the forts were not occupied by the battalion. Such famous pickets of former years as Guides Hill, the Castle, Maxim Post and Bedford Hill remained deserted and were visited only briefly perhaps by a few wandering watchful Ranizai tribesmen. All patrolling about the countryside was left to the Political Agent, who had for this purpose a force known as the Malakand Levies, with whom the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment soon established a most cordial relationship.

The rifle companies took turns to man the forts at Dargai and Chakdara, two months at a stretch. These change-overs were effected by unit transport based at Dargai and as the months passed so did the men of the Battalion get to know the extent and layout of the Malakand base. But once outside the forts, restrictions had to be placed on their general movements when not on duty, owing to the ever present uncertainty which prevailed along the length of the North-West Frontier. Parties going outside the walls had to be properly organized and the men were not allowed to wander off on their own. But this did not mean that they lacked opportunity for observing and getting to know the local population. Their natural charm and cheerfulness soon broke down the barrier of reserve and suspicion of the fierce Ranizais from Shahkot and the surrounding district, and this popularity was to stand them in good stead when

troubled times again came to the frontier to plague both administration and army alike.

At Malakand caravans would rest on their way southwards to Dargai or Nowshera, 60 miles distant; camels would then be unloaded and merchandise of all descriptions would be carried into the bazaar. Fierce Afghan tribesmen would soon be mingling with the local Pathans — big men with thin lips, keen eyes, and great black beards, in baggy trousers of coarse cotton cloth and sheepskin cloaks. Women accompanying the caravans, or indeed living alongside the people at Malakand, were few and less picturesque. They presented an unattractive appearance in dirty cotton sacks covering them from top to toe, with only two latticed holes in the headpiece to allow them to see. This purdah system, and many other customs, seemed strange and unnecessary to the boys from Assam, but they were wise in their own behaviour amongst this strange and violent people, amongst whom blood feuds and hatreds abounded. It must reflect to their credit that never once did they come into collision through stupidity or tactlessness with the local population and were themselves in return accepted with good grace.

As strict a control as possible had to be kept on all persons entering the forts and tribesmen had to surrender their rifles and other arms to the guard commanders before being allowed to enter the gates. The weapons were stored and could be collected again when their owners went outside the forts again. There was rarely any unpleasantness and the operation usually passed off with a smile and a joke, though it was plain that the Pathans did not like being deprived of their weapons even for a short time. Sometimes a blind eye would have to be turned on the actions of one of the visiting khans who might come up accompanied by his bodyguard bristling with arms of all descriptions. The arrogant khan would then stride disdainfully through the gates and fling his personal weapons at the guard as he went in to seek out the fort commander. Discretion on such occasions was the better part of valour. However, one Company Commander got his own back one day when a parti-

cularly troublesome khan arrived to watch the company's mortars in action. As the shells exploded up the barren hillside of the rifle range the officer turned and was heard to remark, 'And they will reach your village too quite easily, if necessary, Amin Khan'. The Pathan nobleman's face reflected no emotion as he nodded his head pensively and murmured before moving off, 'I know, Sahib, I know'.

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History was now, however, being made in India faster than was pleasant for the average soldier there. The country stood on the very threshold of her new sovereign independence but, alas, not as one complete unit. The idea of Pakistan and the separation of Muslim India from the rest of the country, originally presented in vague terms by Mr. M. A. Jinnah's Muslim League, had gathered force — it was now about to become a reality. Communal differences were too great to bridge and violence simmered below the surface throughout India as political tension mounted and the early months of 1947 slipped by.

In helping to establish this new political order the Indian Army was called on to display all the patience, tolerance and impartiality for which it has long been noted. All three battalions of the Assam Regiment were soon ranged alongside those forces and worked hard to ensure a peaceful conclusion to the proposed constitutional changes. In our case it was a heavy burden to place on young shoulders, yet how well did the excellent men of Assam discharge their duties.

In May the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment arrived back in the provincial capital from Burma. At a ceremonial parade held at Shillong in honour of the return of the Regiment, the Governor of Assam, Sir Akbar Hydari, presented the Military Medal to Havildar Dilhu Angami and Naik Yambhamo Lotha.[1] The unit remained in training

[1] See Appendix VII

at Shillong completing its full transition to peacetime organization. There also it said a final goodbye to many of its British officers, in particular to its Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Hugh Parsons. It was a sad day for the Battalion as it witnessed the departure of a well-loved and respected officer who had, by efficient leadership and example, done a great deal to make his Battalion, and indeed the whole Regiment, proud of their heritage. Command now passed to the hands of the first of the new Indian commandants, Lieutenant-Colonel Mohindar Singh Chopra from the Frontier Force Rifles and a few days later the last of the British Adjutants, Captain Peter Steyn, also left after handing over to Captain Kumar De.

In the following month of June the old and the new, the 1st and the 3rd Battalions, went off side by side on operations in the Sylhet area to assist the Civil Authorities there in maintaining peace and order during the holding of the referendum which was to decide whether Sylhet would remain part of India after the transfer of power or would break away to form part of an eastern wing of the new state of Pakistan.

Duties in aid of the Civil Power are never very easy ones in the life of a soldier, but the men of the two Battalions of the Assam Regiment proved themselves equally at home in dealing with situations requiring diplomacy, as they had in dealing more roughly with the Japanese in the jungles of Assam and on the plains of Burma. Their task was not made any easier by the flooded condition of the whole of the Sylhet district, but much amusement arose on the occasions when country craft and old paddle steamers had to be used as a means of transporting stores and men about the countryside. Indeed one company with Major Amar Sen at the helm proved too much for a decrepit and ancient vessel, which sank pathetically a few miles out of port. Stores, rations and goats went down with the ship, or were carried away by the river current, and this occasioned the message, 'Steamer sunk, so have rations. Send more'. So far as regimental records show this was the only time an

officer of the Regiment was given an independent naval command, and what a humiliating end!

The time had also come for the Training Centre to control the discharge of those men wishing to leave the army now that the war was over, and to run vocational courses for such men while they waited for their final release. The Pre-Release Section, organized by Major L. Wyatt, considerably helped hundreds of men in their return to civilian life and successfully fought many battles on their behalf in obtaining for them land to cultivate around their villages and other recognition from the District Civil Authorities.

In this quiet period of expectancy Shillong and Assam waited out the remaining few weeks before the day nominated for India to receive her independence.

* * * *

Over on the other side of India, at Malakand, the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment also prepared for the 15th of August, for that was now known to be the day on which both India and Pakistan would unfurl their national flags and take their places beside the nations of the world. As that day drew nearer the whole political atmosphere of the frontier area underwent a subtle change. No longer were there smiles and good-feeling towards our men on the part of the local Pathans, instead they were bland and watchful. There was little doubt that the tribesmen were now seeing the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment as unwanted foreign troops who would have to look to their own safety once power no longer lay in their hands. Only through the good offices of the Political Agent, and the loyalty to the regiment and tireless propaganda done in placing the Battalion fairly and properly in the minds of the Pathans by Major Ahmed Jan, were some of the more anxious and disturbing moments passed off. Major Ahmed Jan and his family were well known to the people of the North-West Frontier and to him the Battalion owed a great debt for its safety during those turbulent days.

At Retreat on 14 August the Union Jack, which had floated for so long and so proudly over forts up and down the North-West Frontier, was hauled down for the last time. As the clear notes of the bugle died away so all over India the symbol of British rule was being lowered. At some places there were parades and large gatherings to witness the ceremony, at others, like Malakand, there was just a small group of British officers to salute the old order and welcome in the new.

While the Political Agent unfurled the next day the flag of Pakistan over the main fort at Malakand so in Assam the Governor took the Royal Salute beneath the new saffron, white and green banner of the Dominion of India. Troops of the two Battalions of the Assam Regiment in Shillong, as well as men of the Training Centre, were on parade that day. It was a moment of great achievement for India and, also a moment for reflection.

* * * *

On 21 September after a month of uneasy existence, the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment began its move out of Pakistan. For the first phase the unit concentrated at Dargai after handing over its former responsibilities to a battalion of the Frontier Force Rifles. There it was to wait until the Malakand Levies were ready to escort it out of tribal territory, when its protection would be guaranteed by a brigade of the new Pakistan Army. The destination of the Battalion was said to be Madukarai, near Ootacamund in South India, and the prospect of a return visit to that little-loved area was tempered only by the news that Madukarai was a family station. However, the Battalian was not destined to return to South India just yet and it turned aside for other adventures soon after crossing into India.

On the second day of the journey the train entered the 'refugee belt', an area of almost unbelievable tragedy. Hundreds of thousands of Hindus frantically trying to get to India, and masses of Muslims fighting equally desperately

to reach Pakistan, were clogging the roads and railways, wet to the skin, hunger-ridden, and without hope. Of the situation confronting the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment an officer has written:

> 'The train staff were in a state of despair and inertia. The railway stations were thronged with these refugees, many of them dead and dying on the platforms. Our men were furious and disgusted. The flies were in swarms and it was just like the Burma Retreat of 1942, only worse because there was no apparent enemy.'

But enemy there was, only they did not wear uniforms and were not easy to distinguish from amongst the hordes milling around. Fanatics on both sides were busy ambushing trains and motor columns, butchering and killing. It therefore became unsafe for the Battalion to continue travelling along the main line into India and the train was diverted across country and along circuitous routes until it finally reached the frontier.

The actual crossing from Pakistan into India had about it a touch of farce, appreciated even at the time by the officers and men of the Battalion. The train drew to a halt as it approached the west bank of the Ravi river and silhouetted against the night sky stood out the steel girders of the bridge spanning the water. As it grew light the Commanding Officer was called on by the engine driver and his mates to inform him 'this is where we leave you'. No amount of argument could persuade them otherwise and there the matter rested until along came a Pakistani army officer. Using a mixture of charm and firmness Lieutenant-Colonel Yeates pointed out to the newcomer that it was Pakistan's responsibility to get the Battalion out of the country and what action did he propose to take. The dilemma was finally solved when the engine driver was persuaded to unhitch his engine, place it behind the train and give the carriages a push across the bridge. And so with a terrific jolt and a rush the 2nd Battalion Assam Regiment arrived in India, but with no means of proceeding on their journey.

Eventually later that day an Indian locomotive did arrive and off they went to Ambala, only to be plunged into another blood bath of communal rioting. All plans for the Battalion to go to South India were now cancelled for there was urgent work for every available soldier right there at Ambala. It was to be a terrible time for the Battalion but it came through the ordeal with flying colours and a greatly enhanced reputation, having withstood as severe a strain and trial as experienced by units engaged in the fighting during the war.

But it is not the purpose of this chronicle to relate the story of the Assam Regiment after the transfer of power in India. A full account must, therefore, be left to some future regimental historian, and the brief outline here of the 2nd Battalion's advent into India and arrival at Ambala serves only as an introduction to the time when the Battalion really came into its own.

* * * *

So after only six short years a solid foundation of regimental spirit and honour had been firmly laid. In war and in peace the men of Assam had proved themselves. By their bravery, endurance and patience they had brought to reality the noble sentiments with which they had been charged by the Governor of Assam when he addressed the 'old originals' on the 15th of June in 1941. Now, with the traditions they had made, the laurels they had won and the spirit of their comrades who had died to guide them, they could look with confidence to the future and an even brighter horizon.

EPILOGUE

AS THE FIRST Commanding Officer I have been honoured by being asked to add a postscript to this History of our Regiment to 1947.

Every member of the Assam Regiment, past and present, will agree that we are greatly fortunate in having had the story of these momentous years so patiently and vividly recorded. The Regiment has gained by this History not only a proud memorial to its past, but a lasting inspiration to its future.

I say this because, as the History shows, few young regiments can have built up a tradition of courage and tenacity more quickly than did the Assam Regiment under my successors. And tradition, as every soldier knows, is the heart of a regiment, more potent by far in time of stress than mere numbers of force of arms. Those who fought so well and, more, those who died so gallantly with and for the Regiment, have left behind them a legacy of glory and inspiration for their comrades to share for ever.

In his Foreword Sir Robert Reid, to whom we owe so much, spoke of the good fortune of the Regiment in its early days. In my time I can testify that the foundation of this fortune lay in the splendid spirit and soldierly qualities of the men of Assam and its frontier hills. No one who served with such men could ever forget them.

This is why, though the total of ex-Assam Regiment officers is very few in comparison with most, much older, regiments, an enthusiastic Re-union Club still meets each year — in London for convenience though the members are scattered over the world.

At these Re-unions much of the talk is of the years covered by this History; not however of the great events but of the small — postings and transfers, retirements, promotions and the fortunes of battalion teams — just the 'line bat' in fact, beloved of regimental officers.

But, be it noted, such talk does not end with the events current at the time when, ten years or more ago, most members of the Re-union Club parted from their Regiment. News still flows to and fro; the personal links between the past and the present still endure, thanks largely, may it be said with gratitude, to the Commanding Officers of today.

This History which belongs to all of the Regiment, past, present, and future as well, will I think still further cement these links of affection. May this be so. And may the Assam Regiment ever prosper.

BRIGADIER R. C. HOWMAN, C.I.E., O.B.E.

APPENDIX I

Press Communique issued by the Government of Assam

An Assam Combatant Unit to be known as the 1st Battalion The Assam Regiment is to be raised at once. In the war of 1914-18 numerous men from Assam passed to military service, mainly through the Assam Rifles: On this occasion also it has been decided that recruitment and initial training will be conducted through the medium of the Assam Rifles, but it is a great landmark in the history of the Province that it will now have a direct connection with the Indian Army, in the form of a unit carrying the provincial title as its designation. A single regimental unit will scarcely afford room for all the applicants for enlistment who will be found in every class of the population and every part of Assam: and it is inevitable that in the first instance the strength of the unit should largely be found from those elements who have hitherto taken advantage of the opportunity of service with the Assam Rifles. But the class composition has been drawn widely so as to provide for the enlistment, as far as feasible, of the best of the youth from all parts of the Province who are fit and willing to accept the conditions of military service. The Government of Assam are confident that this great opportunity will be welcomed by the flower of the youth of Assam, and that they will demonstrate the hardihood, discipline, willingness to work together and other soldierly qualities which are necessary to establish a reputation for the new regiment: and they feel that even greater and wider calls which may hereafter be made by the Army on the peoples of Assam will be responded to with alacrity. Many questions of detail remain to be decided before recruitment is put into force, but everything is being done so as to ensure a fair field for those who are known to have been for many months eager to play their part in the defence of the country.

H. G. DENNEHY
Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam

APPENDIX II

Patrolling on the Eastern Frontier—1942

'Routine' operation they called the patrol when we left our base on the 'home' side of the border, where for the past few months cloud, mist and rain have enveloped the countryside.

We struck off the road after a few miles and followed the bridle path which plunged through dense tropical foliage. Soon we were provided with our first typical example of the high degree of improvization which is a feature of these operations in Burma.

Across a raging stream, a temporary bridge of bamboo and telephone-wire had been constructed by an earlier patrol. To support, on either side of the river had been fastened several strands of wire, from which the superstructure of the temporary bridge was suspended. The roadway was formed by interlaced bamboo, covered with cane matting, and in an emergency it would be capable of bearing a light motor vehicle.

Across the bridge, the ground rose to over 2,000 feet in a distance of a few miles. The path up which we struggled during a downpour of rain, was a mountain stream in full flood. Our arrival drenched and exhausted at the summit brought us to the end of many days of marching and to an advanced post in a Naga village.

The next day we continued down into the valley.

The going was easier now and in the early afternoon we contacted our most advanced post, which was held by an Indian unit—in fact it had never been evacuated.

So far we had met no opposition. From time to time figures semi-naked but carrying a rifle and ammunition, would leap out from jungle. They were members of the guerrilla forces, drawn from Naga and Kuki tribesmen, who operated throughout the hills. Having satisfied themselves as to our bona fides they would disappear into the jungle again.

Once we met a party of refugees, numbering about 40, making for India. They told a pitiful tale of Japanese and traitor-Burman cruelty and treachery. Out of the original party, they declared, several had been killed by Burman dacoits.

Burmans whom we occasionally met towards the end of the outward journey appeared to be friendly and answered freely all questions asked by the Intelligence Officer who accompanied the patrol.

Late one afternoon, we arrived at our destination—formerly a busy centre, now literally a village of the dead. There was no sign of life. Buildings appeared as if they were still occupied. On entering, we found sometimes only emptiness, but sometimes human skeletons, lying around the various rooms.

There was horror in that village, an atmosphere of death and decay. It had been a long journey for many exhausted and hunger-stricken people who had died rather than give in.

We turned then towards India. And so, day by day, all along this extensive eastern front patrols go out, scouting and probing—unspectacular perhaps, routine by name, but vitally essential and deadly efficient nevertheless.

APPENDIX III

Order of the Day by Lieutenant-Colonel W. F. Brown, D.S.O., O.B.E. dated 24 April 1944

'On the successful relief of Kohima, the Commandant wishes to express his sincere admiration for the excellent work of all ranks of the battalion. He wishes to emphasise the fact that the successful delaying operations at Mol He, Jessami and Kharasom on the part of this battalion saved much valuable time which, in conjunction with that acquitted by the combined and successful defence of Kohima, has permitted superior British forces to be concentrated in order to destroy the enemy and prevent an attack on the Assam Valley. Such an attack would have had serious consequences on the efforts of our American and Chinese allies moving down from Northern Burma and based on Ledo, as well on our own forces in the Imphal-Tamu area.

A great deal of excellent work has been done and it is hoped that suitable recognition will be made. The Commandant wishes to express his deep sympathy with the families of those who have so willingly laid down their lives and with those who have been wounded in the service of the Empire and wishes them speedy recovery from their sufferings. All officers join the Commandant in this.

Higher Command have expressed their appreciation of our efforts directed towards the final defeat of a cruel and miserable enemy who knows that his well-deserved fate is rapidly approaching.'

APPENDIX IV

Letter from Major-General J.M.L. Grover M.C., General Officer Commanding 2nd British Division, dated 1 June 1944

'I am writing to you on the occasion of the transfer of your battalion from my command, to express my warm appreciation and thanks for the valuable services which your battalion has rendered during the time it has been operating with the Second Division.

For over a month your battalion has had the task of protecting the right flank of the division on the spurs below Phulebudze. This was a most important task since it was essential to the success of my operations that the Japanese should not be permitted to work round that flank again and threaten our positions above Jotsoma. Your position on the now famous Ring Contour was also essential to the flank protection of the operations of 6 Infantry Brigade.

I should be glad if you would tell all ranks of your battalion that I appreciate the keen way in which they have carried out their constant patrolling in thick and difficult country, and their success in ultimately clearing the small but strong enemy position located on the spur above them.

I congratulate your battalion for voluntarily undertaking further operations at a critical time when our resources were much stretched, although your battalion had suffered such heavy casualties and was badly in need of a rest and refit.

Please convey to all ranks of your battalion my thanks for all they have done, and my best wishes for the future. I hope it will soon be possible to release them for their much needed rest.'

APPENDIX V

Letter from Lieutenant-General W.J. Slim, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Fourteenth Army dated 2 October 1944 addressed to Lieutenant-Colonel W. F. Brown, D.S.O., O.B.E., Commanding Officer of 1st Battalion Assam Regiment

'Many thanks for your kind congratulations. It has been through chaps like you and your troops that we have won our victories, and I am more grateful to you all than I can say.

You may be the youngest unit under my command, but you're pretty precocious !'

APPENDIX VI

Letters received after the death of Lieutenant-Colonel W. F. Brown

(a) From Major-General R.A. Savory, C.B., D.S.O., M.C., Infantry Directorate dated 8 February 1945

'I have just returned from leave in England and have learnt of the death in action of Lieutenant-Colonel W. F. Brown, D.S.O., O.B.E., and I write to tell you what a shock it was to me to learn this very sad news.

The Assam Regiment owes a very great deal to Colonel Brown. I knew your battalion very well in the early days of its existence and was able to see at close quarters all the hard work, energy and inspired leadership put into it by him.

Will you please convey to the officers and men of your battalion from me, as Major-General, Infantry, and also as one of their old Divisional Commanders, and I hope a personal friend, my sympathy with them in their loss and my confidence that the inspiration given to them by Colonel Brown will carry them through any further operations they may be called upon to undertake.'

(b) From Lieutenant-Colonel J.A.S. Turnball, Commandant, The Assam Valley Light Horse dated 9 February 1945

'On behalf of myself and all ranks of the Assam Valley Light Horse, I wish to convey our very deep regrets at the death of Colonel Brown, D.S.O., O.B.E. Our sincere sympathy goes out to you all for the grievous loss you have suffered.

From the closest association with him, right from the formation of the Assam Regiment and, in the case of many of us, for years before that, we have the happiest recollections of his helpful, cheery yet forceful personality which endeared him to us all; and for him to be cut off after such a conspicuous record of gallantry and outstanding ability is truly tragic. The loss to the Regiment is greatly to be deplored and we mourn with you the loss of a very brave soldier and a valued friend.

APPENDIX VII

Speech by His Excellency Sir Akbar Hydari, the Governor of Assam, on 30 May 1947

'On behalf of the Government and people of Assam I am glad to welcome you back.

Raised six years ago at a time when Assam was gravely menaced, you were entrusted along with other units of the Indian Army with the Defence of India's North Eastern Frontier. This trust you have loyally discharged; the Province is proud of you; and we are glad that before proceeding elsewhere you will now have rest and recreation amidst these green and pleasant hills.

You form part of the Indian Army. As such your loyalty to the Country it serves must transcend Provincial loyalities; but in serving India well and truly in these hard times you will also be serving Assam. In war courage and toughness were most highly prized. In peace you will have to add forbearance to your qualities.

I hope that the Regiment will periodically visit its home Province. You may be sure that when it does a warm welcome will await you.'

APPENDIX VIII

Commanding Officers of the Regiment

I	TRAINING BATTALION/REGIMENTAL TRAINING CENTRE		
	Major Bola Singh Lama	— 1. 7.43	— 25. 9.43
	Lieutenant-Colonel C. H. Campbell	— 26. 9.43	— 12. 3.44
	Lieutenant-Colonel B. E. A. Connel McDowell	13. 3.44	— 7. 5.44
	Lieutenant-Colonel H. E. Madge	— 8. 5.44	— 31. 1.46
	Lieutenant-Colonel G. F. X. Bullfield, D.S.O.	1. 2.46	— 1. 1.48
II	1ST BATTALION		
	Lieutenant-Colonel R. C. Howman, O.B.E.	15. 6.41	— 27.12.41
	Lieutenant-Colonel W.F. Brown, D.S.O., O.B.E.	— 28.12.41	— 3. 1.45
	Lieutenant-Colonel Mohd Ayub Khan	— 4. 1.45	— 27. 2.45
	Lieutenant-Colonel E. H. M. Parsons, D.S.O.	28. 2.45	— 20. 6.47
	Lieutenant-Colonel M. S. Chopra	— 21. 6.47	— 9. 9.47
III	2ND BATTALION		
	Lieutenant-Colonel I. N. MacLeod	— 15. 4.42	— 20. 8.44
	Lieutenant-Colonel R. H. Lowe	— 21. 8.44	— 2. 9.45
	Lieutenant-Colonel J. F. R. Woodhouse	— 3. 9.45	— 1. 3.46
	Lieutenant-Colonel C. W. Yeates, D.S.O.	— 2. 3.46	— 28. 9.47
IV	3RD BATTALION		
	Lieutenant-Colonel F. R. S. Cossens, D.S.O., O.B.E.	— 1.11.45	— 11. 6.47
	Lieutenant-Colonel Waheed Haidar	— 12. 6.47	— 26.11.47

APPENDIX IX

Subedar-Majors of the Regiment

I TRAINING BATTALION/REGIMENTAL TRAINING CENTRE

Subedar-Major Kaliprasad Khatri	— 21. 8.43	— 15.10.45
Subedar-Major Lohit Chandra Rajbongshi	— 16.10.45	— 14. 9.46
Subedar-Major Dwarikanath Angami	— 15. 9.46	— 22.12.49

II 1ST BATTALION

Subedar-Major Devi Sing Mech	— 15. 6.41	— 14. 4.42
Subedar-Major Opin Chandra Mech, O.B.I.	15. 4.42	— 30. 6.43
Subedar-Major Jatiya Mikir	— 1. 7.43	— 31.12.44
Subedar-Major Bela Lushai	— 1. 1.45	— 31.12.50

III 2ND BATTALION

Subedar-Major Devi Sing Mech	— 15. 4.42	— 30. 6.43
Subedar-Major Opin Chandra Mech, O.B.I.	1. 7.43	— 23. 1.45
Subedar-Major Dwarikanath Angami	— 24. 2.45	— 14. 9.46
Subedar-Major Seikhup Kuki	— 15. 9.46	— 14. 9.51

IV 3RD BATTALION

Subedar-Major Khagendra Nath Gogoi, M.C.	1.11.45	— 23. 1.51

APPENDIX X

Honours and Awards

Distinguished Service Order

Lieutenant-Colonel W. F. Brown, O.B.E.
Lieutenant-Colonel E. H. M. Parsons

Order of British Empire

Lieutenant-Colonel W. F. Brown

Order of British India (2nd class)

Subedar-Major Opin Chandra Mech

Military Cross

Major	A. I. Calistan
Major	Sidhiman Rai
Lieutenant	J. N. Corlett
Lieutenant	P. Steyn
Major	D. E. Lloyd Jones
17102-IO Subedar	Sarbeswar Rajbongshi
17100-IO Subedar	Khagendra Nath Gogoi
44843-IO Jemadar	Tonghem Kuki

Indian Distinguished Service Medal

202	Havildar	Kandarpa Rajbongshi
1778	Sepoy	Wellington Massar

Military Medal

555	Naik	Dilhu Angami
356	Naik	Imtisang Ao
2587	Sepoy	Dunio Angami
504	L/Naik	Yambhamo Lotha

Mention-in-Despatches

Lieutenant-Colonel	E. H. M. Parsons
Captain	N. H. M. Stock
Lieutenant	M. G. Williamson
28306-IO Subedar	Kapthuama Lushai
13740-IO Subedar	Thangchhinga Lushai
19721-IO Subedar	Lohit Chandra Rajbongshi
35533-IO Jemadar	Tongkhotong Kuki
48864-IO Jemadar	Bana Lushai
706 Hav/Clerk	Minaram Baruah
695 Havildar	Maino Huzai Kachari
405 Havildar	Bholanath Sarma
446 Havildar	Kama Lushai
176 Havildar	Paliana Lushai

Mention-in-Despatches (Cont.)

635	Naik	Tekasashi Ao
504	Naik	Yambhamo Lotha
1874	Naik	Raltawnliana Lushai
1016	L/Naik	Gendaram Sangma
1095	L/Naik	Jogendranath Gohain
1076	L/Naik	Thanthuama Lushai
563	L/Naik	Kemvu Angami
532	L/Naik	Thanchinjam Kuki
458	Sepoy	Vanngura Lushai
1891	Sepoy	Thanzama Lushai
182	Sepoy	Khargeswar Rajbongshi
1864	Sepoy	Raltawnliana Lushai
819	Sepoy	Lalringkhuma Lushai
2098	Sepoy	Zaithuama Lushai
3020	Sepoy	Lalthanzauva Lushai

Certificate of Gallantry (Supreme Commander S.E.A.C.)

405	Havildar	Bholanath Sarma
1799	Sepoy	Lalringliana Lushai
2478	Sepoy	Kaichhinga Lushai
3033	Sepoy	Tlangthanga Lushai
3197	Sepoy	Zamkhotinlian Kuki
3216	Sepoy	Chalmawia Lushai

Commendation Card (Commander-in-Chief A.L.F.S.E.A.)

58841-JC	Jemadar	Durgaram Mech
52832-IO	Jemadar	Beljen T. Sengma
477	Naik	Khaivunga Lushai
1538	L/Naik	Onphung Kuki
1889	L/Naik	Lalmuanga Lushai

APPENDIX XI

Roll of Honour

'KILLED' IN ACTION DURING WORLD WAR II

Srl No	Regt No	Rank	Name	Date of casualty	Theatre and place of casualty
1	AI-27	Lt Col	Brown, W. F., D.S.O., O.B.E.	4- 1-45	Burma
2	EC-1826	Maj	Askew	14- 4-44	,,
3	EC-184203	Maj	Corlett, J. N., M.C.	24- 1-45	,,
4	EC-38623	A/Maj	Thurgood, G. B.	25- 3-44	,,
5	EC-164803	A/Capt	Anscombe, J. A.	3- 4-44	,,
6	EC-1498	A/Capt	Brown, P. A. L.	6- 4-44	,,
7	EC-12343	WS/Lt	Warren, F. D.	13- 5-44	,,
8	EC-175591	WS/Lt	Young, J., M.C.	31- 3-44	,,
9	17105-IO	Sub	Kaindra Rajb	27- 3-44	,,
10	107	Jem	Lalhuliana Lushai	2- 4-44	,,
11	52830	Jem	Saithanga Kuki	4- 1-45	,,
12	1036	Sep	Bharat Ch Rajb	12- 4-44	,,
13	732	Sep	Belford Warbah	6- 4-44	,,
14	2856	Sep	Biaksanga Lushai	22- 2-45	,,
15	267	Sep	Chungjahen Kuki	17- 4-44	,,
16	941	Sep	Chawngbuaia Lushai	17- 4-44	,,
17	1841	Sep	Chhaunvawra Lushai	7- 4-44	,,
18	947	Sep	Chalthuama Lushai	18- 5-44	,,
19	1818	Sep	Chalkunga Lushai	25- 3-44	,,
20	1802	Sep	Chalhelira Lushai	2- 4-44	,,
21	362	Sep	Dhaniram Saikia	1- 4-44	,,
22	1647	Sep	Garoram Rajb	29- 1-45	,,
23	1896	Sep	Hauzama Lushai	24- 1-45	,,
24	2035	Sep	Hurkaram Kachari	2- 4-44	,,
25	1812	U/P/Lnk	Hrangtuma Lushai	5- 2-45	,,
26	1147	Sep	Jangkhopao Kuki	31- 3-44	,,
27	306	Nk	Jamkishea Kuki	28- 3-44	,,
28	592	Sep	Khezeto Sema	1- 4-44	,,
29	1669	Sep	Keitawna Lushai	15- 4-44	,,
30	1054	Sep	Kuaia Lushai	2- 4-44	,,
31	605	Sep	Khuihe Sema	2- 4-44	,,
32	1839	Sep	Khawlchunga Lushai	31- 3-44	,,
33	1157	Sep	Khamjalian Paite	1- 3-45	,,
34	1916	Sep	Khuangkunga Lushai	29- 1-45	,,
35	2478	Sep	Kaichinga Lushai	11- 7-45	,,

Srl No	Regt No	Rank	Name	Date of casualty	Theatre and place of casualty
35	1632	Sep	Kailas Chandra Dass	7- 1-45	Burma
37	2129	Sep	Liankhothang Kuki	1- 4-44	,,
38	374	L/Nk	Lalthianga Lushai	17- 4-44	,,
39	1838	Sep	Lalzema Lushai	8- 5-44	,,
40	1667	Sep	Lala Lushai	2- 4-44	,,
41	819	Sep	Lalrikhuma Lushai	2- 4-44	,,
42	1847	Sep	Lalbuanga Lushai	2- 4-44	,,
43	578	Sep	Langkhopao Kuki	2- 4-44	,,
44	283	L/Nk	Laineilam Kuki	8- 5-44	,,
45	2865	Sep	Lalduha Lushai	4- 1-45	,,
46	294	Nk	Lengkhul Kuki	4- 1-45	,,
47	984	Sep	Lalzawna Lushai	1- 5-45	,,
48	2714	Sep	Moli Chandra Deka	17- 1-45	,,
49	1023	Sep	Mikson B. Momin	2- 4-44	,,
50	524	Sep	Ngulkhothang Kuki	5- 4-44	,,
51	1800	Sep	Noliana Lushai	15- 4-44	,,
52	1589	Sep	Nolit Chandra Rajb	27- 5-44	,,
53	1052	L/Hav	Praneswar Madashi	12- 2-45	,,
54	520	Sep	Pakhosei Kuki	8- 4-44	,,
55	1827	Sep	Paudama Lushai	31- 3-44	,,
56	1695	Sep	Pokuovi Angami	28- 3-44	,,
57	2418	Sep	Paokhosei Kuki	7- 5-45	,,
58	826	Sep	Rohnuna Lushai	12-12-44	,,
59	664	Nk	Robuaia Lushai	18- 5-44	,,
60	466	Sep	Robula Lushai	7- 5-45	,,
61	1805	Sep	Rochhunga Lushai	2- 4-44	,,
62	653	U/P/Lnk	Sashiso Lotha	4- 1-45	,,
63	175	Hav	Sitawna Lushai	24- 1-45	,,
64	533	Sep	Saliezu Angami	17- 4-44	,,
65	1619	Sep	Syama Charan Roy	28- 3-44	,,
66	419	L/NK	Simon Lyngkhlem	14-4-44	,,
67	5149	Nk	Sher Bahadur Limbu	19-2-45	,,
68	330	Sep	Thangneh Kuki	7-4-44	,,
69	2995	Sep	Thangkunga Lushai	24-5-45	,,
70	2425	Sep	Thangkholem Kuki	7-5-45	,,
71	1821	Sep	Thanzauva Lushai	15-8-45	,,
72	486	Sep	Tsulangsang Lotha	17-4-44	,,
73	313	Sep	Thangjamang Kuki	28-3-44	,,
74	1076	L/NK	Thanthuama Lushai	22-10-44	,,
75	1825	Sep	Thangzika Lushai	15-4-44	,,
76	701	L/NK	Thangjagin Kuki	1-4-44	,,
77	322	W/S/NK	Thangkhukhang Kuki	2-4-44	,,
78	123	NK	Thangkhuma Lushai	2-4-44	,,
79	1910	Sep	Thaneswar Sangma	18-5-44	,,
80	635	W/S/NK	Tekasahi Ao	20-1-45	,,

Srl No	Regt No	Rank	Name	Date of casualty	Theatre and place of casualty
81	340	W/S/NK	Tiatense Ao	4-1-45	Burma
82	1770	Sep	Tonglian Kuki	1-2-45	,,
83	2255	Sep	Yangkongmathang Ao	16-1-45	,,
84	141	W/S/Hav	Zachhinga Lushai	27-3-44	,,
85	90	Hav	Zathangpuia Lushai	12-4-44	,,
86	F/58	W/W	Ahmed Rahman	2-4-44	,,
87	F/53	Swpr	Amu Kabui	2-4-44	,,
88	F/145	Masalchi	Hafez Ahmed	2-4-44	,,
89	F/146	M/C	Nurhussain	2-4-44	,,
90	F/177	Swpr	Ramswamy	2-4-44	,,

'DIED' DURING WORLD WAR II

Srl No	Army No	Rank	Name	Date of casualty	Theatre and place of casualty
91		Lt Col	Campbell, C. H.	13- 3-44	Burma
92	EC-9662	T/Capt	Lubic, K. K.	6- 5-44	,,
93	17097-IO	Sub	Bajenath Rava	13-12-42	,,
94	2552	Sep	Aikima Lushai	16- 3-45	,,
95	1441	Sep	Biakliana Lushai	29- 4-45	02E, ALFSEA
96	2162	Rect	Biakiana Lushai	10- 4-43	Burma
97	3507	Hav	Budram Rajbongshi	26-12-44	,,
98	1917	Sep	Denikhonek Kuki	1- 4-44	,,
99	2987	Sep	Duotsolie Angami	9-10-44	,,
100	860	Sep	Gopi Kanta Rajb	29-12-42	,,
101	993	L/Hav	Hualrochhunga Lushai	28- 1-46	02E, ALFSEA
102	1051	Sep	Harendranath Rajb	29- 6-44	Burma
103	1416	Rect	Haulen Hmar	24- 6-42	,,
104	1027	Sep	Harendra M. Sangma	3- 6-46	02E, INDIA
105	2639	S/Cook	Harka Bahadur Kowar	2- 4-44	Burma
106	589	Sep	Inakha Sema	29- 7-42	,,
107	320	Sep	Jogeswar Konwar	28- 6-42	,,
108	722	Sep	Jogendra Tamuli	17- 6-42	,,
109	1436	Sep	Kapleia Lushai	11- 6-43	,,
110	342	Nk	Khranungba Ao	17-11-44	02E, INDIA
111	2416	Sep	Kaikhopao Kuki	19-12-44	02E, ALFSEA
112	129	Hav	Kamaleswar Mech	3-12-44	Burma
113	517	Sep	Kaikholam Kuki	5-11-46	02E, ALFSEA
114	404	Nk	Kameswar Rajb	26- 1-45	,,

Srl No	Regt No	Rank	Name	Date of casualty	Theatre and place of casualty
115	3698	Sep	Khargeswar Ram Roy	13- 4-46	02E, INDIA
116	4328444	Sep	Khamjakham Paite	15- 3-47	02E, ALFSEA
117	443	Sep	Laithuama Lushai	16- 6-43	,,
118	2890	Sep	Lungjahel Kuki	25- 2-44	Burma
119	1837	Sep	Lalhlira Lushai	25- 1-45	,,
120	1799	U/P/Lnk	Lalringliana Lushai	29- 7-45	,,
121	1664	P/Lnk	Laia Lushai	13- 2-45	,,
122	457	Sep	Liana Lushai	16- 3-43	,,
123	1790	Sep	Lalkhuma Lushai	15- 4-43	,,
124	3545	Sep	Mahabahadur Tamang	21- 6-44	,,
125	1836	Sep	Mankhunga Lushai	19- 7-43	,,
126	420	Hav/Clk	Modrickson Kharkungor	23- 2-43	,,
127	4757	Sep	Manbahadur Newar	19- 3-44	,,
128	4756	Sep	Madan Mech	9- 6-44	,,
129	597	U/P/Lnk	Nitoyi Sema	15- 2-45	,,
130	502	Sep	Nchemo Lotha	11- 7-42	,,
131	1996	Sep	Nangzatum Kuki	25- 6-43	,,
132	94	Nk	Ngamkhusei Kuki	3- 6-42	02E, INDIA
133	272	Sep	Paokhothang Kuki	4- 8-44	,,
134	2531	Sep	Phirtea Lushai	12- 5-46	02E, ALFSEA
135	1765	Sep	Phukan Chandra Rava	2- 5-44	Burma
136	727	Nk	Prema Kanta Bargohain	15-12-42	,,
137	2099	Sep	Ropianga Lushai	2- 9-43	,,
138	2390	Sep	Rupsing Rajbongshi	27- 5-45	Burma
139	128	Nk	Ransingh Garo	22- 6-43	,,
140	1424	Sep	Rajeswar Kachari	27- 3-45	,,
141	550	Sep	Ruhatsuyi Angami	6- 8-42	02E, INDIA
142	2316	Sep	Rama Kanta Madashi	2- 4-47	02E, ALFSEA
143	572	Sep	Solhulie Angami	8- 3-44	02E, INDIA
144	2250	Sep	Satsuo Lotha	3- 5-46	02E, ALFSEA
145	401	Sep	Surja Kumar Mech	9- 4-44	Burma
146	85	Hav	Tarun Chandra Buragohain	11- 6-42	,,
147	566	Sep	Thesie Angami	13- 7-42	02E, INDIA
148	292	Nk	Tonghao Kuki	12- 1-44	,,
149	1988	Sep	Thangkhoneh Kuki	30- 7-43	Burma
150	3032	Sep	Thangkhuma Lushai	23- 2-43	,,
151	238	P/A/Hav	Tarak Chandra Rava	3- 9-43	02E, INDIA
152	2828	Sep	Tawhrima Lushai	26- 4-44	Burma
153	2192	Sep	Tekemenen Ao	24- 6-45	02E, ALFSEA
154	2338	Sep	Tawna Lushai	11- 4-47	,,
155	2637	Sep/Ck	Tolsing Karki Chettri	2- 4-44	,,

Srl No	Regt No	Rank	Name	Date of casualty	Theatre and place of casualty
156	4328176	Rect	Thawnliana Lushai	13- 8-45	02E, ALFSEA
157	534	L/Nk	Vinetho Angami	6- 5-44	,,
158	3348	Sep	Vihoshe Sema	19- 1-44	,,
159	3520	Sep	Wachimo Lotha	28- 3-44	,,
160	1778	Sep	Wellington Masar, I.D.S.M.	18- 5-44	,,
161	F/78	Swpr	Kannan	23-10-43	02E, INDIA
162	F/15	W/C	Lal Bahadur Phanwar	4- 4-44	Burma

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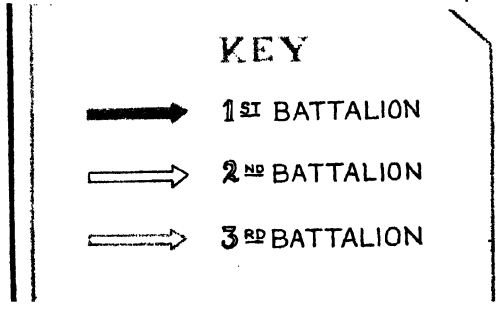
References to regiments, units and formations will be found grouped under 'American, British, Burma, Chinese, East African, Indian, Japanese Army Units'.

दिनांक Date	उधारकर्ता की संख्या Borrower's No.	दिनांक Date	उधारकर्ता की संख्या Borrower's No.



MAP SHOWING THE JOURNEYS OF